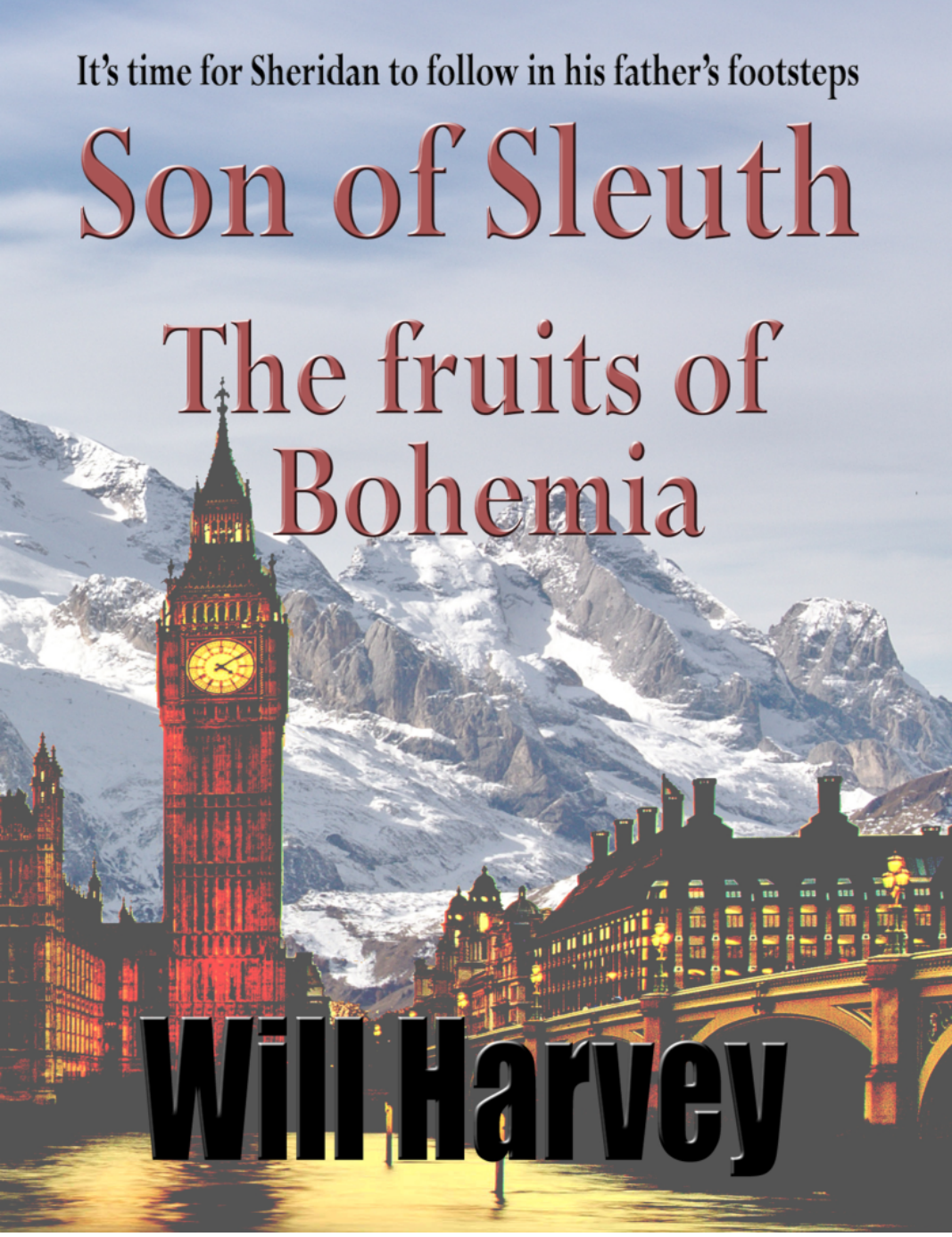
It's time for Sheridan to follow in his father's footsteps

Son of Sleuth

The fruits of Bohemia



Will Harvey

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Based on the characters created by
the genius of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
for which the world is eternally grateful

Intro…

‘It looks like we have a new client,’ said John, an elderly man, slightly jaundiced, pulling the heavy curtain to one side.

‘Man or woman?’ asked another elderly man with white unkempt hair, firmly seated in a well-worn, winged armchair.

‘I can’t tell from here.’

‘Well, that in itself, speaks volumes.’

John continued to peer through the Georgian window down onto the busy street below. Now, no longer filled with horse-drawn cabs and top-hatted gentlemen but Uber taxis and brightly dressed cyclists.

It was apparent that Mrs Hudson was taking longer and longer to ascend the stairs. Quite a while later there was a knock on the door.

‘High time you answered the door to your callers yourself!’ snapped Mrs Hudson. ‘My hips aren’t what they used to be… A gentleman to see you, Mr Bishop he calls himself.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Hudson. We really must think about getting a stair lift installed,’ sympathised Sherlock.

‘Stairlift? Fiddlesticks!’ raged the elderly lady.

Mrs Hudson left, chuntering angrily, leaving an obviously disguised man with a long coat and wide-brimmed hat, hovering on the threshold.

‘Come in, come in, my dear chap. Please sit down and calm yourself. Clearly, you have the severest of concerns to be veiled and troubled in such a way.’

‘I’ll come straight to the point. I desperately need your help,’ pleaded the disguised caller.

Somehow Sherlock knew in an instant that he was about to be embroiled in the most dangerous, most diabolical case he had ever taken on. After a few silent moments of deduction, he had one important question to ask,

‘Don’t I know you?’

Contents

Introduction
Chapter 1: A father's tear
Chapter 2: A stranger calls
Chapter 3: Meeting Uncle
Chapter 4: Safehouse
Chapter 5: A good night's sleep
Chapter 6: Russian cigarettes
Chapter 7: A fop act
Chapter 8: Condensation
Chapter 9: A short taxi ride
Chapter 10: The journey begins
Chapter 11: Kidney beans
Chapter 12: Violence
Chapter 13: Burning cold
Chapter 14: A new friend
Chapter 15: Weakest link
Chapter 16: Familiar shoes
Chapter 17: Everest is no mountain
Chapter 18: Inhibitions
Chapter 19: Marry us
Chapter 20: A drag queen
Chapter 21: Hammerfest
Chapter 22: Three murders
Chapter 23: Shoplifting
Chapter 24: A visit to the Morgue
Chapter 25: The evidence
Chapter 26: 'G' for Greta

Chapter 27: Summing up
Chapter 28: Paper insulation
Chapter 29: Kung Fu business
Chapter 30: Bureaucracy

Chapter 31: Stuff of dreams
Chapter 32: A detective inspector
Chapter 33: Bronzed butler
Chapter 34: Decoy
Chapter 35: Old reprobate
Chapter 36: Reprisals
Chapter 37: Cards on the table
Chapter 38: Loose ends
Chapter 39: Green fairy dress

Other books by the Author
About the Author

Son of Sleuth

His first Case

The fruits of Bohemia

By Will Harvey

Chapter 1

A father's tear

(About thirty years ago)

For over an hour, blood-curdling screams had mercilessly spewed out of the maternity ward like a hail of rubber bullets.

'The baby has to come out,' said the obstetrician.

'You're not slicing me!' cried the woman.

'Sorry, but there's no alternative, we have to or the baby will die.'

A few minutes later, the incision was made allowing the doctors and nurses to ease the baby out. At first, all seemed well, but the cries of the newborn were quickly drowned out by alarm sounds from the various monitors and equipment attached to the mother.

'Heart rate erratic,' panicked the nurse.

'Epinephrine – five cc's, Nurse!'

'We're losing her!'

'She's badly haemorrhaging!'

'No heartbeat!'

'Administering CPR… prepare defibrillator please.'

'Charging… stand back… No heartbeat.'

‘And again.’

‘And again.’

‘We’ve lost her, Doctor.’

‘Is the baby alright?’

‘Yes, fine, a beautiful baby boy,’ said the nurse.

‘Not all bad then. Death timed at 11:34 am.’

A tall dark figure hovered helplessly in the corridor outside the delivery room, out of sight from the doctor and nurses. A tear uncharacteristically formed in his right eye. He didn’t attempt to remove it, letting it flow down his cheek and dangle on his chin.

‘Are you alright sir?’ asked a passing nurse.

‘Yes, yes, fine. Time I left,’ said the man with a distinct croak in his voice.

‘Aren’t you that consul…’

Before she had finished what she wanted to say, he was out of earshot and entering the lift – she ran after him.

Chapter 2
A stranger calls

(Back to present day)

Just one chess piece – a white bishop, had clearly failed to get any recognition even if it was over four inches tall and made out of some strange unearthly material. It had been indiscriminately placed at the back of a shelf in one of the glass-fronted kitchen cupboards amongst several other worthless knick-knacks. No one was quite sure where it had come from or who found it. It had been there for several days, fortunately, not yet threatened with the destiny of a charity shop – or the waste bin.

'Polly, down here, now!' shouted her Mum, Carol, roughly in the direction of the stairs.

'She's texting,' muttered Daniel, Polly's brother, sitting at the table munching his way through his overly sweetened cereals.

'Told you, a seven-year-old child with a mobile phone – an inevitable consequence,' mumbled Sheridan, Dad and husband, whilst chomping through his marmalade on toast – eyes fixed firmly on the TV.

'It's called the 21st century, all her friends have one, and they probably have the latest smartphones, not my old Samsung with a scratched screen. I can get in touch with her when I want and that suits me fine. That's all I'm going to say on the matter at this time in the morning,' clucked Carol.

Sheridan recognised the no-win situation and changed his attention to something else. 'Impressive performance but guilty as sin,' he ranted.

He was referring to a distraught man on the television, whose wife had been horrifically murdered.

'Another of your ridiculous whims?' suggested Carol.

'Not really, it's obvious. He murdered his wife,' said Sheridan, shrugging off the derision.

'Hmm, so, what are you going to do on your day off?' asked Carol.

'I think I'll do a spot of gardening. Those hydrangeas want trimming back. The postman can't be all that happy, squeezing past them every

morning.'

'Well watch the Crocosmias. I don't want them trimming back.'

The television continued to fight for attention as it did every morning at breakfast time, and with Sheridan, it usually won.

'Other breaking news – the head of Scotland Yard, Sir Terrance Daze has been arrested on historical child abuse charges. He is alleged to have assaulted several underage girls back in the seventies…'

'Always thought there was something strange about that man,' said Carol.

'A little bit too convenient don't you think?' reasoned Sheridan.

Then breakfast was abruptly over, coats were fastened and shoelaces were tied. All but Sheridan were rapidly heading towards the front door.

'Daniel, homework!' shouted Sheridan without averting his gaze from the television.

'It's in my bag.'

'I don't think so. You can do it tonight instead of gaming on your PC,' said Sheridan as sternly as he could manage.

'It's not fair,' bleated Daniel.

'Correct, it's not fair on your teacher. She doesn't set your homework for the fun of it, you know.'

'Mum, tell him!'

'Don't bring me into it. You should know by now, you can't get anything past your father.'

And then suddenly there was peace, apart from the noisy dishwasher churning, the washing machine on spin cycle, the tumble drier squeaking with monotonous regularity and breakfast television.

'Now back to our main story: The Minister of education has now been added to the list of prominent people who have mysteriously vanished over the past fortnight. Over to our correspondent outside Downing Street. Morning Ted, is there any more light you can shed on the sudden disappearances of these Ministers, celebrities, entrepreneurs, and so on?

'No, nothing, the wife of Tarquin Smythe, the education minister, was expecting him home last night but he never showed up. The other sixteen prominent people disappeared under similar circumstances.'

'I imagine his wife is distraught?'

‘No doubt she is….’

‘Interesting…’ Sheridan had a thought. ‘No, surely not, now that *would* be… unexpected.’

At that moment the doorbell rang.

‘Who the hell is this?’ he muttered, with his mouth full of toast, as he made his way to the front door.

A slim, fair-haired man in his thirties, stood on the step, he was clearly troubled.

‘Yes, can I help you?’

‘Infinitely more than you know,’ said the stranger.

‘Sorry?’

‘Sheridan Banner?’

‘Yes?’

‘Have you got the chess piece?’ asked the stranger, sternly.

‘Sorry?’

‘Chess piece! It’s so high. I’m expecting it to be white, usually, you put it on a board with lots of other pieces and play a game,’ ranted the stranger.

‘Yes, yes, I know what a chess piece is!’ said Sheridan agitatedly.

‘Look, you moron… you haven’t a clue, have you?’ said the stranger, clearly not holding his words back.

Sheridan scanned the stranger up and down and thought carefully for a moment before he spoke.

‘Okay, okay, I can see why you are agitated. Your car broke down yesterday and you’ve had to rely on public transport and aggressive taxi drivers. I sympathise but it’s no excuse for being bad-mannered!’

‘Amazing, one of the brightest minds in existence, but a complete bonehead. You really haven’t a clue who you are, have you?’

‘Right, right, that’s enough. Goodbye!’ said Sheridan, closing the door on him.

‘I’ll be in the Crown, eight, tonight. Mark Watson’s my name, not that that will mean anything to you,’ shouted the stranger through the letterbox flap.

‘Strange, very strange,’ muttered Sheridan to himself as he walked back into the kitchen.

Chapter 3
Meeting Uncle

Yes, it was a strange day. He couldn't possibly trim back the hydrangeas or empty the dishwasher or the tumble drier or the washing machine or even clear away the breakfast things, he was completely overwhelmed by his impromptu visit.

This was Sheridan Banner's typical reaction to unpredictable events. He was completely unaware of the fact that he was, without doubt, amongst the brightest people on the planet. Unfortunately, throughout his mundane existence, the usefulness of his genius and unique perception of the world about him had never been fully recognised. Everyone, without exception, had mistakenly regarded his gift, his ability and talent, to be annoying, irritating and non-productive. Everyone had become immune to his radical theories and odd opinions regarding snippets he read in the papers or saw on television and largely ignored him. Over the years, Sheridan was forced to accept this ambivalent reaction from almost everyone he came in contact with and submit to a life of writing computer software, doing a spot of gardening and trying his best to enjoy family life.

Now though, in a few seconds, his world had suddenly been turned on its head by this inexplicable event. A complete stranger had called him a genius and a bonehead all in one sentence. This stranger had reminded him, in a roundabout way, that he was adopted at birth. This was true, but there had never been any desire to trace his real parents. He had been perfectly contented with his adopted parents who, incidentally, were now both pushing up daisies.

He slumped into a daze; his thoughts tangled. If he was a machine he would need turning off at the plug and turning back on after ten seconds.

Sheridan's day was consequently a non-event, a distinct contrast to Carol's. She thundered through the back door into the kitchen with arms bulging with shopping bags. To add to her discomfort, water dripped off her rain-soaked coat and hair. Predictably, she was not in a good mood.

'God, what an awful day! Been busy I see?'

'So, so.'

‘Pruners broken? Dishwasher and washing machine not finished yet? Bowls stuck to the table?’

‘Sorry, sorry, had a strange day.’

‘Children upstairs then?’

‘Damn! Completely lost track of the time.’

‘You really are unbelievable! Fortunately, Jenny’s collected them and taken them to Ben Riddle’s party.’

‘Oh Ben, I know… that’s good then. I had a visit this morning, just after you left. A complete stranger… called me a bonehead.’

‘Quite observant then,’ said Carol.

‘He knew I was adopted. Ranted on about a chess piece.’

‘Chess piece? Oh yes, it was on the worktop for days. If you did a bit of tidying up occasionally, you would have seen it.’

‘You’re kidding, a white piece, four inches high?’

‘Look, I need to change into dry clothes. If you can spare the time, could you put the food away, and put the kettle on. Spitting feathers!’ said Carol, ignoring Sheridan.

‘Where is it… the chess piece?’

‘In one of the kitchen cupboards.’

‘Where’s it come from?’ shouted Sheridan as Carol ascended the stairs.

‘How the hell do I know!’

Sheridan toyed with the idea of going in the car but as the pub was only at the end of his street and it had stopped raining, he decided to walk. Frequenting pubs in the evening was something Sheridan never did. Dithering outside the Crown on a cold evening was completely out of his comfort zone. He stepped through the threshold into the noise and bustle of merry people, standing, sitting and fighting for bar attention. The stranger, Mark Watson had distanced himself from the bustle and was sitting alone in a relatively quiet corner with a full pint of lager in front of him. He was visibly agitated and not in any way, absorbing the friendly atmosphere. Sheridan eventually acquired a pint of lemonade (dashed with orange juice) and walked over to Watson’s table.

‘Decided to come then?’ said Mark Watson without displaying any measurable emotion.

‘Could hardly do anything else.’

Sheridan sat down, distancing himself from the stranger.

‘Firstly, who are you and secondly, how come you know all about me?’

‘Firstly, Mark Watson, secondly, your uncle told me.’

‘Uncle? Haven’t got an uncle!’ snapped Sheridan.

‘Yes, you have and a very influential one at that,’ said Mark coldly. ‘Never wondered as to who your real mother and father are?’

‘No, never!’ snapped Sheridan.

‘Your Mother died giving birth to you. A remarkable woman, her name was Irene Adler. Ring any bells?’

‘No, should it?’

‘She was a lady of the evening – as they say.’ said Watson.

‘A prostitute?!! Is that’s what you’ve dragged me here to tell me?’

‘She was also known as *The Woman*.’

‘Well yes, I imagine she probably would be.’

‘Good God, do I have to spell it out! A scandal in Bohemia?’ said Watson irritatedly.

‘Oh brilliant! And I suppose my father is Sherlock Holmes,’ said Sheridan caustically.

‘Finally,’ said Watson calmly.

Sheridan went thoughtfully quiet. His intuition told him that Watson was deadly serious. He took a large gulp of his soft drink and then choked on it.

‘Your uncle, Mycroft, Sherlock’s brother, managed to track you down.’

Sheridan suddenly broke free from this clever trickery. ‘What a load of hogwash! I may look stupid but, apart from many other reasons, Sherlock Holmes is reputed to avoid female companionship. Hardly likely to have any offspring. Come on, what’s this all about?’

‘All is what I say. Several months before you were born, Sherlock Holmes was involved in a case known as the ‘Scandal in Bohemia’ of which your mother was very much a part of. Apparently, they say she was the only person ever to have outsmarted him. Sherlock Holmes was identified by a nurse at the hospital at the time your mother gave birth to you – shortly after, she died. These are the facts… Look in a mirror, you even look like the man!’

‘This is ridiculous!’ exclaimed Sheridan.

‘Yes, it is, that a bonehead is the product of two geniuses.’

‘Look, what is it with you, this attitude? Not exactly friendly and polite, are you?’

‘No, probably not. Come on then, demonstrate. How did you know my car had broken down yesterday and I’ve been using public transport and taxis?’

‘Don’t know, thoughts just come into my mind.’

‘You have the talents of your father multiplied by the cunning of your mother. It comes so easy and natural to you that you don’t even know how you’re doing it. Think it through, man!’

‘For some reason, just looking at you, I know your car has broken down.’

‘So, you’re seeing something that’s telling you that?’

‘Must be.’

‘Look carefully, my face, jacket, hair?’

Sheridan examined these things carefully and slowly. In himself, he didn’t know why he should say his car had broken down but he knew he was right. Finally, he examined his hands. He was about to give up but glanced at a small fading oil stain on the back of his thumb.

‘It’s your thumb, it’s got an oil stain on it!’

‘Good, we’re getting somewhere, carry on.’

Again, Sheridan examined him. Nothing was immediately apparent but something was clearly telling him he had spent time on buses and taxis. Then it suddenly came to him – the faint smell of public transport – urine and body odour, but in addition, the subtle whiff of air fresheners particular to London taxis.

‘Well damn me! It’s the odours your clothes are giving off, and I noticed that your tie had been tugged this morning. Most likely by an irate taxi driver.’

‘It’s second nature to you. You’re doing all this subliminally. You have to be aware of your thought process if your talents are to be of any use.’

Now with time to study Watson in-depth, Sheridan had perceived some additional facts about him, he felt it necessary to share.

‘I also know that you divorced quite recently from a woman you loved

deeply. You now live on your own with a dog, Border Collie I think, and you've tried online dating a few weeks ago but it was unsuccessful. And that's why you're such a grouch.'

'How the hell?'

Sheridan attempted to slow down his thought process – see what his subconscious saw but his conscious failed to see. Then suddenly, everything clicked.'

'Your wedding ring finger, a prominent indent still remains. Evidently, you never took it off – signs of a devoted husband. No doubt it had to be cut off. Your belt is fairly new, but on the last hole, suggesting rapid weight gain from TV dinners. It's also back-to-front. A partner would never let you leave the house like that. Consequently, you must live on your own now. Besides, your appearance suggests you've recently let yourself go. I've already mentioned your odorous clothes. Recently you tried to dye your grey hairs, no doubt to impress a blind date but the dye is growing out now so you've gone off the idea. Oh, and there's a couple of dog hairs on your sleeve, long ones, one black, one white. One breed comes to mind – a border collie.'

'Unbelievable!' exclaimed Watson.

There was no doubt about it, Sheridan had to concede, all the evidence was suggesting that he could be Sherlock Holmes's Son. Then he suddenly realised who this stranger was, sitting across from him.

'So, your father's a Doctor?' asked Sheridan cagily.

'Have you brought the chess piece?'

'Yes.'

Mark Watson calmly and quietly, finished off his drink and then called someone on his mobile phone.

'He's got it… Okay, five minutes.'

'What's going on?' asked Sheridan.

'You're going to meet your uncle.'

Chapter 4
Safehouse

Exactly five minutes later, a black Jaguar glided to a halt outside the Crown pub. Mark opened the back door and climbed in. Sheridan nervously hesitated on the damp pavement.

'My wife will be expecting me home soon,' he whimpered.

'Call her in the car, lives are at stake,' shouted Mark.

Sheridan reluctantly shuffled onto the black leather seat. Before he had a chance to click his seat belt, the car was whisking the occupants along the amber-lit roads in the direction of central London. Mark Watson remained silent and po-faced. For some obscure reason, he appeared to passionately dislike his new associate. Perhaps it was because smart arses annoyed him or perhaps, he was chronically unhappy and Sheridan appeared not to be.

'Hi, Carol… I think I'm going to be a little late… No, no, just lemonade. You'll laugh at this, you know that consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes? Well apparently, it turns out that I'm his son… Said you would, not that kind of laugh though… hello… hello! Looks like we've been cut off, must be the tall buildings.'

Mark said nothing, just raised his eyebrows slightly.

'Are we going far?' asked Sheridan, again breaking the deafening silence provided by the luxury car and its plush interior.

Sheridan never got an answer, not even a murmur from his company. The car broke every speed limit, jumped every red light and squeezed through gaps that even a cyclist wouldn't attempt. He had never seen such skilled driving and so many enraged motorists, but the sleek car never received so much as a tap. Fifteen minutes later they were squealing around tight corners in a secure underground car park. Mark spoke briefly for the first time in a while, 'Scotland Yard.'

'I don't suppose Inspector Lestrade still works here?' asked Sheridan.

It was a reasonable question to ask under the circumstances. After many corridors and lifts, they found themselves in front of a well-dressed man in his mid-seventies.

'Inspector Lestrade?' asked Sheridan apprehensively.

‘No, I’m Mycroft Holmes, your uncle, pleased to meet you!’ boomed Mycroft, an overweight, well-dressed man.

‘Sheridan Banner, your nephew, I gather.’

‘Well, well, I can definitely see the likeness,’ said Mycroft almost chuckling and then he instantly dropped his pleasantries. ‘Have you brought the chess piece?’

Sheridan reached in his pocket and took out a large off-white chess piece with a sticky sweet wrapper stuck to it.

‘Can’t see what’s so important about a cheap plastic chess piece,’ said Sheridan.

‘We think it contains a code which we hope will lead to the whereabouts of your father and Mark’s father,’ said Mycroft.

Sheridan hastily removed the sweet wrapper and examined it carefully before handing it over to his newly acquainted uncle.

‘It’s a bishop, nothing written on it. From the condition, it doesn’t even look like it’s been pushed around a chess board,’ commented Sheridan.

‘I’ve had a similar chess piece – a black knight,’ added Mark.

‘Sorry my dear nephew, we’re being unfair, I’ll bring you up to speed.’

Mycroft proceeded to tell him about the events so far:

A mere three weeks ago, Sheridan’s father and Mark’s father had taken on an unusual and a most serious case, involving the disappearance of several wealthy and prominent people. Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson were clearly on to something when they too, suddenly disappeared.

Their disappearance was a complete mystery – a complete lack of evidence as to their fate. The only clue seemed to be a chess piece that mysteriously appeared in Mark Watson’s home shortly after their disappearance. No one had broken in, no one had a key, but somehow a chess piece, a black knight, had found its way onto his kitchen worktop. Naturally, it was examined. There were no unusual external markings, but when the interior was X-rayed, a string of unusual symbols was revealed – clearly a code of some kind.

‘What kind of code?’ Sheridan asked enthusiastically.

‘Weird symbols, unrecognisable gibberish, only one word stood out – ‘ruin’. Before you ask, most ruins that could provide accommodation have been searched.’

Sheridan thought for a moment…

‘I think you’ll find you’re on the wrong track. Ruin is a word I would have expected. There could have been other words I suppose: lino, cool, cull, lull…’ Sheridan ranted.

Mark and Mycroft stared intently at Sheridan waiting to hear more of his thoughts on the matter.

‘Sorry, rambling, I do that. Don’t know why I said that,’ said Sheridan.

‘You do, think!’ bawled Mark.

‘Now, now, don’t rush my new family member. Anyway, we quickly concluded that this was only part of the information, there was more code, perhaps another chess piece to make sense of it all,’ said Mycroft.

‘My chess piece, a white bishop. How did you know I would have it?’

‘Fairly obvious. For you and Mark to each have parts of the puzzle would conclusively prove that they came from your fathers,’ said Mycroft.

‘Logical I suppose. How long will it take to extract the code from the bishop?’ asked Sheridan.

‘If there is a code, we should have the results by morning,’ chirped Mycroft.

‘Very good, so, if you’ve finished with me, could you take me home now, my wife gets easily irritated, these days,’ said Sheridan meekly.

Mycroft to a deep breath, he knew what he was about to tell Sheridan would not go down well.

‘Told you he was a bonehead,’ said Mark.

‘My dear nephew, what you have to realise is that your circumstances have radically changed since you left your house earlier this evening. You and your family *were* protected by ignorance and anonymity. Now you are on the radar to all those unprincipled in lawful matters. In this digital age, things happen almost instantaneously. Everything about you is now being monitored, scrutinised and evaluated – by the good, but mostly by the bad. The upshot of all this, for their safety, we’ve moved your wife and family to a safe house.’

‘You’ve done what!?’ protested Sheridan.

‘Unfortunately, we’ve had no choice. This is one of the most serious and perilous cases your father has had to deal with… Please, could I have your mobile phone,’

Sheridan reluctantly handed over his somewhat ancient Nokia phone. Mycroft skilfully removed the cover, the battery and the SIM card and threw the remainder of his phone in the waste paper basket. He then slid his desk drawer open and took out a sleek new smartphone, inserted the SIM card into it and handed it back.

'Leaves no footprint – untraceable. Oh, and there's a few extra numbers on it.'

'What happens to me now? I take it I'm not sleeping in my own bed tonight?' asked a nervous Sheridan.

'Will one of the Savoy's do? The best we could manage at such short notice,' said Mycroft apologetically.

'Er, yes, I suppose,' said Sheridan now visibly immersed in deep thought.

This is how it always happened. Unexpected shock or stress and Sheridan's mind went into overdrive. Things not relevant to that moment surfaced like a dolphin showing off. Random thoughts flashed through his cerebellum like a time-lapse video of Oxford Circus. If no one was about, he rambled to himself. If someone was there, especially someone such as Mycroft, it was fortuitous. He had a flashback of the felonious incident he saw on the morning's breakfast news. He had a hunch that the man seen whimpering, was guilty, but couldn't explain his reasons – now he could.

'Mycroft, I assume you are fairly influential with the police?'

'I am involved with the interior ministry. Why, a speeding fine?'

'The woman who was murdered, it was featured on the news this morning.'

'Rosie Barton?' suggested Mycroft.

'Yes, that's her. Her husband killed her. I couldn't put my finger on it this morning but I realise it now. It was the skin on the right side of his neck. It didn't wrinkle the same amount as his left side. Most likely when he strangled his wife, in the struggle, she must have cut or bruised his neck with her fingernails. Evidently, he applied artificial skin to his neck to hide the injury. I think you'll find he works in the film industry as a makeup artist. I noticed several pictures in the background. Science-fiction creatures, probably his creations.'

Mycroft immediately reached for his phone and made an important call.

'Perhaps Bonehead is not applicable, I'll have to find a new name for you.' said Mark.

‘Are you always this unpleasant?’ asked Sheridan.

‘You’ll have to show a little tolerance, Mark has had a rough time recently,’ said Mycroft.

‘It’s too quick, he’s going to jeopardise everything,’ said Mark aggressively.

‘Don’t draw the wrong conclusions from my contentment and composure, things you clearly lack. Do you have a copy of the code from the black Knight?’ asked Sheridan.

‘Yes, certainly.’

Mycroft opened his briefcase and handed him a sheet of paper with a string of symbols on it.

‘Well, it’s good to see you two getting along. I’ve booked you into the same double room,’ said Mycroft

‘You’ve got to be kidding!’ said Sheridan.

‘It’s not going to happen,’ said Mark.

But it did.

Chapter 5
A good night's sleep

Only the best for the sons of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson – a double room in London's luxury Savoy hotel. Two single beds with a modest gap between, encouraged the bonding process. Mark immediately plonked himself on the bed next to the window and remained silent and acutely miserable. Sheridan got out his new mobile phone and made an overdue call.

'Hi Carol, it's me, Sheridan.'

'About time, what the hell is going on,' Carol's voice exploded out of the phone.

'I'm sorry, but it's all out of my hands. It turns out that Sherlock Holmes really is my father. He's disappeared and apparently, I'm involved.'

'They've taken the children out of school and I can't even phone Mum!' Carol continued to scream.

'Is the safehouse okay?'

'Safehouse!? What the hell, was unsafe about MY house? Sheridan, sort this mess out or it's over between us!'

'Hello! Carol, hello… She's gone,' said Sheridan hiding his concerns.

Mark momentarily broke into an unsympathetic smile.

'What IS the problem with you?' asked Sheridan.

'Problem? No problem with me.'

'Yes, there is. Since we've met you've been rude, abrupt and condescending.'

'Have I? Are you sure, so sorry, I didn't realise,' said Mark insincerely.

'You've obviously got issues.'

'Issues? Is that another deduction?' growled Mark.

'Perhaps. Another *observation* is that you're holding a lot back. Want to get it off your chest?' suggested Sheridan.

Okay, okay, if you really want to know, yes, I have issues. All my childhood *I* also lived in safehouses, flitting from one town to another.

I never had time to make friends – never *allowed* to make friends. I've been on anxiety and antidepressant drugs for years. My father and yours may well have been revelling in the just rewards of successful sleuthing and forever being in the spotlight, but my now departed mother and I had to continually hide away. You, on the other hand, had a completely isolated and normal upbringing. Free to go where you please, make friends, play in the park, go to a normal school…'

'Sorry, I understand. I didn't realise. It must have been dreadful,' said Sheridan with concern.

'I don't want any sympathy, I'm just telling you how it was. My whole life has been affected. My marriage was a disaster. I'm boring, unpopular and my social skills leave a lot to be desired, okay? That's me, accept it!'

Sheridan went quiet for a while and then spoke. 'You're wrong about me, life hasn't been particularly smooth for me either. As it now turns out, the unusual abilities that my real parents kindly gifted me with, I have riled, irritated and generally alienated a whole lot of people throughout my life. Consequently, like you, I've never really had proper friends either. God knows why my wife tolerates me, well actually, on reflection, she clearly doesn't. Look, if our fathers can be the best of friends, I'm sure we can make a go of it.

'Looks like we're two of a kind,' said Mark as pleasantly as he could manage.

Sheridan held out his hand, eventually, Mark shook it.

'I'm using the bathroom first,' said Mark.

'I'm nipping down to reception to sort out breakfast!' said Sheridan.

As it happened, Sheridan had the best night's sleep for a very long time, possibly because his inner torment had been addressed and he finally knew who he was. His vast and complex mind was now at peace. Not to mention that he had all the bed to himself.

Breakfast in his room had been booked for 8:30 am and that was exactly when he woke up. There was no sign of Mark, just an unmade bed and a bathroom tap left on. He reached for his phone.

'Mycroft…Uncle, got the code yet?' asked Sheridan groggily.

'Yes, more gibberish, get over here as soon as you can.'

'Okay… Mark's not here.'

'Probably out for a run, leave him a note.'

Sheridan quickly finished off his breakfast, had a shower, left Mark a

note and vacated the hotel. He did his best to retrace his footsteps back to the previous evening's location and eventually found himself outside a large familiar-looking building. He strolled past reception, unchallenged and took the lift to the twenty-seventh floor.

'Ahh, Nephew, glad you could join us!' cheered Mycroft.

'You have the code?' asked Sheridan eagerly.

Mycroft passed Sheridan the sheet of paper with the code from the white rook. As before, the code consisted of a string of eighteen characters. All the characters were made up of straight-line symbols forming: o's, I's, c's, r's, u's, n's, backward r's and backwards c's.

'Well, you don't have to be a genius to figure this one out. Come on, didn't you ever write "BOOBIES" on your calculator,' said Sheridan.

He took the sheet of paper with the codes from the black knight out of his pocket. He then folded each sheet of paper in half and lined up the characters together. Doing this formed a string of seven-segment numbers as found on old-style electronic calculators.

122558125410940616

'Well, well, now I see the significance of the bishop and the knight,' cheered Mycroft.

'The free diagonal movement of the bishop presumably depicts a grid location, longitude and latitude?' suggested Sheridan

'Knight, the only piece that could remotely be associated with time, in this case, I assume a date,' added Mycroft.

'Clearly, the first six numbers are latitude, the second six are longitude and the last six give us a date,' concluded Sheridan.

'Finally, we're getting somewhere… Strange, I wonder where Mark is?' puzzled Mycroft.

Mark's unexpected absence was enough to trigger Sheridan's unique thought process into action. The bathroom tap left on, his watch on the cabinet, unmade bed and scuff marks on the carpet. There was only one possible explanation, he had been abducted and Sheridan had slept through it all. It was, after all, a very comfortable bed. Because of this evidence, Sheridan was about to suggest his conclusions when Mark casually entered the room.

'Well, you could have waited for me! Nothing better than a 5K run in the morning to awaken your spirits,' said Mark cheerfully.

Sheridan and Mycroft both looked at each other with raised eyebrows. Mark clearly sounded in a better mood.

‘I was just beginning to think you’d be taken, like the rest,’ said Sheridan.

‘Sound’s almost as though you cared,’ said Mark.

‘Moving on, we’ve made progress with the codes. We have a date, seven days from now. I’ve converted the coordinates to decimal and I’m just entering them into Google Maps,’ said Mycroft.

‘Southampton docks!’ said Mark, glancing at Mycroft’s laptop.

‘That’s it then. Job done. I can get back to family life once more. Patch it up with Carol and go back to two feet three inches of bed space,’ said Sheridan.

This time it was the turn of Mycroft and Mark to raise their eyebrows.

‘Sheridan, my good fellow, how about you and Mark having a little run down to Southampton? See what you can find out,’ said Mycroft patronisingly.

‘Me? No, I write computer software, not tackle villains. What about the police?’

‘Sheridan, Sheridan, Sheridan, where’s your enthusiasm? Aren’t you curious about the disappearances and what’s happened to your father?’

‘Yes, of course, I am but I can read about it in the papers.’

‘Papers, papers? Full of lies my boy, besides, the police won’t see what you see. Mark will keep you company.’

‘Thanks,’ said Mark insincerely.

Sheridan was blatantly aware that Mycroft had suddenly started to talk like a pompous WW1 general. He was also aware that anything was better than pruning hydrangeas.

‘Okay, but I really don’t want my wife and family in a safehouse,’ Sheridan glanced purposely at Mark. ‘If you could arrange some kind of police protection at my house instead…’

‘Say no more Nephew. No sooner said than done,’ said Mycroft.

‘So, how do we get to Southampton?’ asked Sheridan.

‘Well, you could catch the train. There’s a direct connection from Waterloo station. Don’t know about the buses, you could use a taxi?’ chanted Mycroft.

‘Do we get expenses?’ asked Sheridan, it was a reasonable question to ask.

‘We’ll use my car,’ Mark conceded.

Mark had left his car in a street near to the Crown and not so far from Sheridan’s house, the previous evening. This was convenient as it meant Sheridan could nip home, pack a few things and perhaps empty the dishwasher. They caught a taxi and arrived at the house just as the police were dropping Sheridan’s family off. Daniel and Polly raced over and hugged their dad.

‘We stayed in this house with a massive staircase,’ said Daniel excitedly.

‘And I had fish eggs, they were horrible,’ said Polly.

‘My bed had a post at each corner and I swam in a swimming pool inside the house,’ said Daniel.

‘Simon gave me a mobile phone that I unlock with my fingerprint,’ said Polly.

‘Did he, sweetheart? …and who might Simon be?’ asked Sheridan.

‘He was a policeman, but he didn’t have a pointy hat, he was really nice,’ said Polly.

Sheridan turned toward Carol who didn’t share in the children’s excitement.

‘This is Mark Watson, son of Doctor John Watson. Carol, my wife,’ said Sheridan doing a basic introduction ritual.

‘Hi,’ said Carol in the rudest way possible before heading towards the house.

Mark just nodded. He recognised the lack of enthusiasm.

‘Won’t be a moment,’ said Sheridan to Mark.

One night was all it took for their relationship to freeze over. Sheridan was not in the least surprised, he had seen the signs for a while. They waited until they were on their own in the kitchen.

‘This better not happen again. I suppose we’ve got to have a cop outside all the time now, have we?’ she said in a subdued rage.

‘It’s for your own protection, they won’t come in the house,’ he said calmly.

He could have taken it that Carol was being unreasonably intolerant but Sheridan knew there was more to it than that. It was the excuse she needed – the excuse she had waited a long time for.

Sheridan never said anything but he knew. He knew everything. No

doubt he'd know his name too if he bothered to examine her mobile phone but prying wasn't in his nature. Yes, their marriage was stagnant and had died a long time ago. Superficially, Sheridan was boring. Pruning the hydrangeas, mowing the lawn and doing other mundane tasks was the only way he could take his mind off all the anomalies and discrepancies he constantly deduced in this world that he was unfairly placed in. Carol wanted more than Sheridan could offer. She wanted excitement in her life. Basically, she wanted another man. Ironically, now Sheridan, if he wished, could well have all the excitement *she* ever wanted. Although, he didn't particularly want to share it with her anymore.

'I have to go away for a day or two but when I get back, I think we need to sort a few things out, don't you?' he said calmly.

'Typical, leave everything to me as usual,' ranted Carol.

'There are seventeen people who have mysteriously gone missing. If I can help in any way, I will.'

'Suddenly you're a sleuthhound then?'

'Maybe I always have been.'

Chapter 6
Russian cigarettes

Mark's car was a beautiful old Sunbeam Tiger in British racing green. As luck would have it, it was an open-topped roadster and it was a dry, sunny day. The loud exhaust note and the wind battering their faces made conversation particularly difficult.

'Lovely children!' yelled Mark.

'Yes, they are!' yelled Sheridan.

A few more minutes went by before further communication.

'Five feet, ten!' yelled Sheridan.

'Sorry!'

'Five feet, ten inches tall, dyed grey hair, a good ten years older than me but trying hard to keep young. Wears cheap aftershave, manual worker and is screwing my wife at least twice a week!'

'Oh, sorry!'

'Don't be!'

'You've met him then?!' yelled Mark above the exhaust note.

Up until now, this description and allegations were pure speculations – Sheridan's gut feeling, but now he realised his suspicions were correct. The angle her lipstick was smudged slightly downwards with kissing him, gave away his height. The excessively long black hair, grey at the roots, seen occasionally on her clothes, indicated an older person with an atypical hairstyle for his age. But the hardest thing to bear was the plucks on her tights which only ever happened when she worked over on Monday and Thursday evenings. No doubt the plucks were caused by the rough hands of a manual worker.

'No!'

A few more minutes passed before any conversation could resume.

'4.3 litres?' shouted Sheridan.

'No, 4.7, one of the last made. You know a bit about cars then?' shouted Mark.

'Restored a Frogeye a few years ago. Slightly smaller engine – 948 cc.'

‘Pretty little car!’

‘Went through three gearboxes!’

‘Want a drive?’

This was unheard of, Mark offering his pride and joy to be driven by someone who not so long ago was a bonehead. It probably wasn’t immediately apparent but they were warming to one another.

‘No, no, thanks. I’d probably write it off around the next bend.’

‘The live axle *can* take you by surprise sometimes.’

It didn’t seem long before they were pulling into a car park near the coordinates Mycroft had extracted from the codes within the chess pieces. The coordinates pinpointed the area of docks down to about 100 square feet and as it happened, the quayside was empty. It was a fairly run-down area of dockland, presumably used for periodic commercial freight.

The deciphered code had apparently revealed two facts: this location and a date, presumably of an event, seven days in the future. Either the event was to happen exactly where they were standing in seven days’ time… or, more likely, the date referred to a separate event elsewhere. In an instant, Sheridan concluded it was the latter.

‘So, nothing to go on here. Seems like a wasted journey,’ bleated Mark.

‘On the contrary, less than twenty-four hours ago, something untoward happened here. A lorry and at least one man and one woman were here. The lorry had a high jib which unloaded those crates behind you.’

‘How the hell do you know that?’

‘My dear Watson, you have to learn to use your eyes, not just as one of your senses, but as a tool. What do you see?’ said Sheridan probably sounding very much like his father.

‘A grubby deserted dock, locked buildings and four huge wooden crates!’ said Mark as intelligently as possible.

‘Excellent, the crates, but also look near your feet. Fresh gouge marks from the stabilising arm of the lorry not yet washed with rain. As it poured down yesterday, the marks are recent. Look over there, a dry fag end and another one there. One has traces of lipstick on, the other doesn’t. Now sometimes what you don’t see is as important as what you see. Notice anything not here?

‘A ship?’ suggested Mark.

‘Apart from that. Normally there would be security cameras in an area like this but conveniently, there aren’t.’

‘A carefully chosen blind spot!’ suggested Mark.

‘Exactly! Whatever happened here, they did it covertly, and probably illegally,’ said Sheridan.

‘When you explain it, it’s pretty obvious,’ said Mark.

‘Hindsight always is.’

Sheridan proceeded to examine the crates.

‘What are we hanging around for then?’

‘Just passing the time. The police will be here at any minute,’ said Sheridan factually.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, why would the police be on their way?’

‘Just a hunch – doctored my copy of the code.’

‘You what!?’

‘A nice young lady down at reception, last night, let me use the scanner and her computer. I altered a couple of characters in the code – the same code I gave to Mycroft this morning.’

‘Not following, how come we have ended up here with incorrect coordinates?’

‘We would have ended up here however much I tampered with the code. Think about it, Mycroft is reputed to even outsmart his brother Sherlock’s intelligence. He had to have known all along what the characters of the code indicated. It was obvious that he was up to something. I decided to put him to the test.’

‘The devious bugger! So, let me get this straight, the real code, the real coordinates, actually refer to somewhere else entirely?’ concluded Mark.

‘Yes, precisely… I really am beginning to sound like my father.’

‘You said it. Shame we haven’t got the code from the white bishop,’ said Mark.

‘Actually, we have,’ said Sheridan as he pulled a tightly folded piece of paper out of his back pocket.

‘How the…’

‘Sleight-of-hand, another of my talents!’ crowed Sheridan.

Just as he returned the paper to his pocket, three police cars hurtled

along the quayside with sirens blaring. They noisily screeched to a halt and exuded several police officers, one of them appeared to be the spokesman.

‘Mark Watson and Sheridan Banner, I am arresting you for illegal import of drugs and arms. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?’

‘Everything, apart from where are the drugs and arms,’ said Mark.

At that very moment, the other police officers were breaking open the wooden crates behind them. Two were filled with boxes of various medicines and the other two, an assortment of rifles, hand weapons and boxes of bullets. Mark looked in the crates in bewilderment.

‘You’ve got to hand it to Mycroft, perfectly planned,’ said Sheridan calmly.

It seems that they had been elaborately framed by someone as clever as Sherlock Holmes, but perhaps not as smart as Sheridan Banner.

Chapter 7
A fop act

Sheridan had never been in a police cell. He expected white painted breeze block walls, a red-tiled floor and a hard metal-framed bed. He didn't expect a TV, tea and coffee making facilities, wood laminate flooring and a coil spring mattress. Not only that, he had the room to himself. Mark was presumably in another equally palatial room.

Much to Sheridan's annoyance, it was four hours before he was escorted into an interview room and asked to sit before a middle-aged portly police inspector and a much younger police sergeant. A third officer stood next to the door.

'You do realise everything is circumstantial. You can't prove the crates are anything to do with us,' said Sheridan.

'We have it on good authority from…' began inspector Jackson.

'…Yes, yes, no doubt right from the top. You'll find that the information came from the minister Mycroft Holmes,' said Sheridan, trying to save time.'

'We believe that you have been instrumental in the import of four crates. Two containing an assortment of weapons and two containing banned drugs. They were unloaded from a small freight ship. Clearly, you intend to start a small war or sell them on the black market,' orated Sergeant Morris.

'There's no 'clearly' about it. Believe what you want, but there were no CCTV cameras in the area to confirm that. Besides, we have no transport vehicle or for that matter any means of lifting the crates onto a vehicle – unless you count a classic two-seater sports car – legally parked, I might add.'

'Come on now, Mr Banner, admit it, you are part of a terrorist group,' goaded inspector Jackson.

'Oh, for god's sake, bring back Lestrade, at least he could think for himself,' said Sheridan getting slightly frustrated.

'If you must know, Detective Inspector Lestrade retired several years ago. I had the privilege of working with him on many occasions,' said Jackson.

‘You did? You’ll have dealt with Sherlock Holmes then?’ said Sheridan.

‘Many times, highly irritating twerp,’ said Jackson.

‘We’re digressing,’ said Sergeant Morris, ‘stick to the case.’

‘I’m the twerp’s Son,’ said Sheridan, a matter of factly.

‘Don’t like to burst your bubble, but Sherlock Holmes was never one for fraternisation with the opposite sex,’ stated Jackson.

‘That’s what I thought until two days ago, a bit of a shocker,’ said Sheridan poignantly.

‘Son of Sherlock Holmes…’ said Morris, they both laughed.

‘Come on then, what have you deduced, son of Sherlock?’ jeered Inspector Jackson. They both laughed again.

‘Okay, you asked for it… You’re having an affair with a blonde policewoman, dyed blonde, the one we passed on the way in here I suspect.

Your bank account has been suspended.

You had porridge for breakfast.

You got up late for work this morning

You’ve taken to occasionally wearing a corset…’

‘Okay, that’s enough,’ barked inspector Jackson.

‘I’ve only just got started… Now you,’ referring to Sergeant Morris, ‘are far more interesting. There’s no easy way of saying this, you’re a chronic alcoholic. Your wife kicked you out two nights ago. You sleep here at your desk. It’s three days since you changed your underwear, and there are signs that you may be constipated.’

‘Shut the hell up, creep,’ screamed Morris.

‘I’ve got some pills for constipation,’ said Jackson sympathetically.

‘Thanks. Corset eh? Didn’t know they did them for men, are they comfortable?’ asked Morris.

Thanks to Sheridan’s character assassinations, it wasn’t long before they were released and all charges dropped. They caught a taxi back to the car park where Mark had left his car. There was still ten minutes left on the parking ticket.

‘Now what?’ asked Mark.

‘I managed to work out the real coordinates whilst I was in the police cell – whatever they call it now.’

‘I think I’ll complain. Barely enough milk for two cups of coffee. Where to, then?’ asked Mark casually.

‘Wakering, Essex. The longitude and latitude from the code, centred on a large country mansion close to the coast. Think the old girl will get us there?’

‘Probably not,’ said Mark truthfully.

But it did, apart from slightly overheating and running on seven instead of eight cylinders for much of the journey. They pulled up, windswept, outside the grand entrance gate of a Georgian mansion. The name on one of the huge gate posts indicated that it was Bellington hall. A forty-seven-year-old sports car, missing on one cylinder would hardly go unnoticed pulling up the drive so they decided to walk the final hundred yards or so. They distanced themselves from the gravel drive just in case any security cameras were in operation. In truth, Sheridan had never experienced measurable risk or danger, after all, he was a computer programmer – a profession mostly regarded as risk-free. However, with his keen eyesight, he noticed bullet damage in several tree trunks. Whoever had been at the hall must have been considerably gun-happy. Thoughts surfaced that they may be still there.

As it turned out, they may as well have driven up the drive. Peering through the large sash windows on the ground floor revealed that it was completely vacated and empty of furniture, carpets and curtains. Even the light fittings had been removed.

Moments later, disturbing the peaceful bird chatter, an old Range Rover raced up the drive and violently braked on the loose surface, scattering pebbles in all directions. A tall elderly man dressed in typical country gent attire hastily jumped out of his high seated position with a crunch as his wellingtons sunk into the gravel.

‘This is private property! I must ask you to leave!’ yelled the man.

‘Oh, my dear chap, couldn’t help but notice this charming house from the road. How absolutely splendid, don’t you know,’ said Sheridan assuming the deposition of a fellow country gent.

‘I must ask you to vacate the estate immediately,’ said the elderly man, now with a double-barrel shotgun in hand.

‘What a fabulous, fabulous house, I want, want, want it. Please tell me it’s for sale.

‘I believe it will be on the market shortly,’ said the man with the gun which was now hovering roughly in their direction.

‘Could I, could I, please have a look inside, do say yes?’

Sheridan tried not to look at Mark whose bewildered facial expressions would have jeopardised the whole act. Sheridan’s sleuthing talents were indeed impressive but his ‘fop’ act topped the lot.

‘I suppose so. Just a quick look,’ grunted the man.

‘Splendid, absolutely splendid,’ said Sheridan.

The house was bare and depleted of any historical events, clues and evidence. Even Sheridan Banner’s remarkable attributes produced nothing of any significance. Whoever occupied the house had done an impeccable job in cleaning up after them. Sheridan expected to have gleaned a wealth of information from the surroundings, but very little was revealed. The old man/caretaker followed them around, often, far too close for comfort. Now in an enclosed space and away from any outside breeze, the aromas of must, tobacco and body odour swamped the airspace around him.

Mark naturally did his best to outdo his newly found partner and carried out his own observations. On a window ledge in the main reception room, he spotted a distinct pattern of scratches in the paintwork – a group of three and a group of four. As he wandered about the house, spotting these groups of scratches became an obsession. Some window ledges had scratches and some didn’t. Sheridan, on the other hand, was on another tact. He discretely examined the floor, walls, doors, ceilings and anything else that could possibly hold a clue. All he found was one rubber earplug on the floor in the corner of a room.

‘That’s long enough, if you want to see more, you’ll have to wait until it comes on the market and then go through the agents,’ said the old man irately.

‘Of course, my good man. I think we’ve seen all we need to see. Do you know who the current owners are?’

‘Er, a Mr Smallfoot, I believe.’

That’s as much as the old man was going to say.

Sheridan needed more time. Perhaps a couple of hours would have been more profitable in finding clues. However, unlike Sherlock, he had a wife and family, not just a landlady to attend to. He had to get back home. There were now only five days before the date in the code

but families have to come first.

Mark decided to lift the bonnet and investigate the misfire before they set off.

‘Bloody plug lead’s come off,’ said Mark, relieved that it was a simple fix. Once replaced, the car ran perfectly again.

It was a warm, sunny afternoon and apart from the occasional wasp in their hair and midges in their teeth, it was a joy to have the hood down.

‘I feel as though something’s shouting out at me, but I don’t know what. I got nothing in the way of clues from the house…’ shouted Sheridan above the wind and exhaust noise.

‘Well actually *I* did, something very significant,’ shouted Mark smugly.

‘And what might that be?

‘Surprised you didn’t see them, marks on the window ledges,’ shouted Mark.

‘Seven scratches? Obviously, I saw them. At least we know my father was there and which rooms he went into,’ shouted Sheridan.

‘Here we go,’ despaired Mark. ‘Explain…’

‘Morse-code! A group of three long marks, then a group of four short marks – ‘S’ and ‘H’?’

‘Of course, Sherlock Holmes!’ shouted Mark.

‘Indubitably! I’ve always wanted to say that. At least we know he was free to wander about most of the building. The question is, why didn’t he try to escape?’

‘Perhaps he couldn’t, perhaps he didn’t want to.’ suggested Mark.

‘Clearly, he didn’t escape or we wouldn’t be on this mission and we wouldn’t have two chess pieces with hidden messages in them.’

‘What about Smallfoot? Obviously, a made-up name,’ said Mark.

‘More than likely, but regarding the house, I’m missing something, I’m sure of it.’

‘Perhaps a good night’s sleep will help,’ said Mark sympathetically.

As expected, there was a frosty reception when Sheridan returned home. His wife had now moved on to the next level of hostility. He was prepared for this, but his main concerns were always with his children. He ignored the ranting from Carol as he ascended the stairs.

Polly was asleep; her new mobile phone was quietly playing away to itself. Sheridan turned it off and gently placed it on the bedside cabinet. For some reason, most mobile phones have to make a little tune when they are turned off – this woke her.

'Hi Daddy,' said Polly sleepily.

'Hello Sweetheart, have you had a good day at school?' he asked softly.

'No, Esme pinched my arm.'

'Why did she do that?'

'Don't know. All I did was send her a text saying her tummy wobbled.'

'Well perhaps from now on, it would be a good idea to say nice things in a text.'

'Yes, Daddy.'

Polly drifted quickly back to sleep. He kissed her on her forehead and quietly left the room. Daniel was predictably still awake playing a combat game on his computer tablet.

'Hi Dad, on level twelve!' said Daniel without looking up from the screen.

'Oh, very good. Rub the ground with the warrior's left leg and jump to the next level through a wormhole,' said Dad.

'That's cheating… left leg?'

'Now for that bit of information, do you think you ought to go to sleep now?'

'Alright… Dad, are you a secret agent?'

'Of course, not, I'm just solving puzzles to help people. Now get that head on that pillow.'

'Okay, night, night, love you.'

'Love you too, Son.'

That was the children quickly attended to. Naturally, he realised that he was just creaming off the good bits and leaving the other mundane tasks like taking them to school, feeding them, amusing them, nursing their wounds and washing their clothes, to his wife. The atmosphere was thicker than jam. Carol refused to start any sort of conversation.

'So, how long have you been seeing him?' asked Sheridan spontaneously.

It took a while but eventually, she replied. 'About five months.'

‘What’s his name?’

‘Robert.’

‘Do you love him?’

She struggled with an answer which basically meant yes. Her lack of a reply didn’t particularly matter, Sheridan’s thoughts had drifted on to something else – something he had said a few moments ago to Daniel.

‘Actually, I want a divorce… Did you hear what I said!’ bawled Carol, snapping him out of his deepest thoughts.

‘I said, I want a divorce.’

‘*You* can tell the children then,’ said Sheridan coldly.

Sleeping alone in the chilly spare room on a worn-out mattress was not the most pleasurable experience. By four in the morning, Sheridan concluded that he had all the sleep he wanted, needed and could tolerate. Apart from this, he had many things buzzing around in his head. Above all, he was frustrated and shamed. Apparently, Sherlock Holmes had found an ingenious way of covertly bringing Bellington hall to their attention with data hidden in two chess pieces, but he might as well have not bothered. With all Sheridan’s inherited deductive skills, he hadn’t come up with so much as an inkling.

‘Mark, we need to get back to Bellington,’ whispered Sheridan into his mobile.

‘Do you know what time it is?’

‘Of course, I do, ten past four.’

There was no point in protesting. Mark’s sleep pattern had been irrevocably disturbed. It took a while for Mark to arrive. Sheridan decided to wait outside in the rain under a street light. Even there, was preferable to being in his house. The Sunbeam Tiger wasn’t particularly good in the wet. The wipers missed much of the windscreen and the bit they touched, smeared with an annoying squawk. The hood leaked in so many places that it was debatable whether it was actually keeping any of the rain out. It wasn’t particularly good in the dark either. The old-style seven-inch headlights were there just to satisfy the MOT test, nothing to do with lighting up the road.

‘Couldn’t it wait?’

‘The wife wants a divorce.’

‘Oh, I see, sorry.’

Sheridan didn't have to say anymore, he couldn't.

'Stuck with you then,' said Mark.

'Not irritating you anymore then?'

'You will always do that. I have a spare room, if…' said Mark with noticeable effort.

'Thanks, that's…'

'Kind of me? No, not particularly, I could do with help with the rent.'

By the time they reached Bellington Hall, the sun had appeared, the rain had stopped and it was mid-morning. This time they dispensed with caution and drove up the long gravel drive. Sheridan focussed his attention on the branches of the trees on either side while Mark tried, for some reason, to keep his precious car out of the puddles.

Moments after pulling up outside the front of the hall, the same old man/caretaker raced up the drive in his old Range Rover. Clearly, he was on the ball.

'I told you to go through the agents!' he boomed.

'Got here remarkably quickly?' suggested Sheridan.

'I've told you! You're trespassing!' bawled the old man.

'We wanted another look,' said Sheridan, this time without the fop attitude.

The speed at which the old man managed to produce his double-barrel shotgun from out of nowhere was bordering on a miracle.

'Leave now or you'll get both barrels!' the old man continued to bawl.

Despite his age, he was particularly intimidating, especially with an unspecified amount of lead shot at his disposal. Being a computer programmer, Sheridan had little experience in violent confrontations. Mark seemed to have even less and cowardly hid behind Sheridan.

The upshot of this was that Sheridan had very little time to glean any further clues. He glanced at the hall, the windows, the entrance, then at the drive, the grounds and towards the distant sea view. All his skills, every last proton of his inherited talents had to come into play, and then they did. Completely unaware of the thought process going on within his head, the human computing power to rival any manmade device, he had the answer. Exactly how he had the answer would follow in the fullness of time. His consciousness worked at a much slower pace.

'You don't scare us!' said Mark, clearly trembling.

‘Okay, Watson, dear chap, I’ve seen what I’m looking for. We can go.’

They hurriedly climbed back into the car, awkwardly contorting their legs into the seat wells. The car struggled to start but eventually fired on all cylinders. Mark selected a suitable gear and hastily drove off, scattering gravel predominantly in the old man’s face. Inevitably buckshot peppered the boot of the Sunbeam – or it could have been gravel.

‘Well that’s one explanation for bullet holes in the trees,’ said Sheridan.

‘My bloody car,’ howled Mark.’

‘A bit of T-cut and it’ll be as good as new,’ said Sheridan unconvincingly.

‘Come on then, what have you seen?’

‘I can’t believe I missed it. We both looked in the windows, we both saw the scratches, but we missed the most important clue of all.’

‘Yes?’ urged Mark.

‘Inconsistencies are sometimes the best clues. Something an empty house shouldn’t have.’

‘What? What!? Food in the fridge? Towels in the bathroom?’ said Mark petulantly.

‘There was excessive condensation on the windows!’ said Sheridan smugly.

‘Yes, right, there was, so what?’

‘When we first visited the hall, did you notice the gravel drive fronting the house? It had been recently raked flat. Convenient, don’t you think? Obviously to remove any tyre ruts. But clearly, at least one heavy vehicle had recently been up the drive because of several broken branches on the trees on either side of the drive.’

‘Proving what?’ said Mark now clearly flustered.

‘Proving we have one hell of a mystery to solve. And it gets deeper, I’ve tried to check up on the history of Bellington hall online. Being a well-maintained Georgian mansion, there should dozens of entries but there’s nothing, not even a single link. It can only mean one thing; the name’s recently been changed.’

‘We have to go pre-digital then… The local library?’ suggested Mark.

‘What are we waiting for?’ said Sheridan.

Chapter 8
Condensation

Fortunately, Wakering library hadn't bowed down to the onslaught of the interweb. Its doors were still open to the public. The Victorian building was staffed by just two people, a man and a woman who looked as old as the building itself. Sheridan and Mark proceeded to the reference section, which happened to be a small separate room smelling of must and old leather.

'Can I help you?' said the male librarian.

'Have you any information on a Bellington Hall, about three miles west of here?' asked Sheridan.

'Never heard of it. Hmm, let me look.'

The librarian took several attempts at bashing the keyboard before he spelt it correctly and then gazed deeply into the green monitor screen.

'No, nothing, where do you say it is?'

'Three miles west of Wakering – a large Georgian house,' reiterated Sheridan.

'Mollie!' yelled the librarian at the top of his voice, 'A Georgian residence about three miles west of here!'

'Say again Albert!' the other librarian yelled back.

'Georgian house, three miles west!'

'That'll be Rixley House!' yelled Mollie.

Albert, the male librarian typed a couple of words, then waited, then typed a bit more and waited and then stared deeply into the screen.

'Ahh, here we are, section R, 140 to 155.'

Albert escorted Sheridan and Mark to the appropriate shelf. To his shock, the entire shelf was empty.

'Mollie, Section R, 140 to 155 – it's empty!'

Mollie shuffled over to the reference section as quickly as she could. No longer did she have to shout which was just as well as she was almost out of breath.

'Well, well, tut-tut, they were there the other day. I'm sure they were,'

said Molly, clearly concerned.

‘No matter, the fact that they’re missing…’ began Sheridan.

‘…Speaks volumes,’ interrupted Mark.

And it did. Someone had clearly removed the reference books from under Mollie’s and Albert’s noses – which was probably not difficult. Someone had done their very best in hiding all traces of its beleaguered past. But it wasn’t difficult for a sleuth with impeccable credentials to work out what the hall’s history amounted to.

‘Now what?’ asked Mark.

‘A trip to the beach, we’ll go for a paddle,’ said Sheridan cheerfully.

They had to walk a good half a mile and then scramble down a steep cliff path before they found themselves standing on a secluded pebbled beach. Mark had given up protesting and learned to give in to his new friend’s whims.

‘I believe, behind that crag over there, we will find what we’re looking for,’ said Sheridan.

Mark scuttled over the loose pebbles to a narrow walkway hewn between the rocky coastline. It led to an old rusty iron doorway blocked with several heavy rocks. They were far too heavy and cumbersome to move, but no matter, Sheridan’s suspicions were confirmed.

‘A cave?’ suggested Mark.

‘Close, a tunnel leading directly to Bellington Hall. If my hunch is correct, the condensation on the windows of the Hall is the result of large quantities of concrete drying out inside the house. Lorries delivering the concrete deeply rutted the gravel drive, explaining why the drive had been recently raked flat. Think, Watson, a remote Georgian house, seventeenth century, near to the coast?’

‘Smuggling!’ said Mark excitedly.

‘Precisely, a smugglers tunnel. Probably well used in the eighteenth century. No doubt, illegal trade from India,’ suggested Sheridan.

‘So, for some reason, they’ve filled in the tunnel entrance at the hall.’

‘To put us off the scent and cover up their tracks,’ said Sheridan.

‘To make us think the missing people are still somewhere in this country but they have been taken to a boat!’

‘Precisely, although I suspect a ship more than a boat. How I managed to miss the condensation on our first visit – inexcusable. That’s why

my father highlighted the S, H, marks particularly on the window ledges. I didn't even recognise the smell of the fresh concrete.'

'I was unaware that concrete has a smell. It seems I have a lot to learn.' said Mark.

'Apparently, so do I,' said Sheridan.

He continued to scold himself and then proceeded to pace up and down the pebbled beach. He raised a few rocks and examined underneath them. Suddenly he stopped in his tracks and picked up an object.

'Something interesting?' asked Mark.

'Yes, a cigarette butt with a gold foil tip. We need to speak to my uncle!'

Chapter 9
A short taxi ride

Mycroft was holding something back, there was nothing more certain. He had given Sheridan false coordinates which lead them, naively, into an elaborate trap at Southampton docks. It was completely out of character for someone who had often assisted Sheridan's and Mark's fathers in their complex and challenging cases. One possible explanation, Mycroft Holmes, who occasionally *is* the British government and possibly the most indispensable man in the country, had been got at. If this was so, speaking to Mycroft was not going to be straightforward.

The drive back from the coast was very pleasant and invigorating – for the first ten miles or so. After that, the old girl decided to become irritable and bad-tempered by persistently misfiring. The inevitably backfire frightened many birds and cyclists but it was an old car – it was excusable. Then with only ten miles to go, it was the gearbox, or the clutch, or the back axle or something. And then the car didn't move, not even slowly. The car was eventually collected by the breakdown service.

A taxi was now the preferred method of transport and probably the best option as their next jaunt was to the center of London.

Mycroft wasn't difficult to track down – a creature of habit, leaving his offices near Kensington Palace at 5:30 pm and walking to his flat in Notting Hill.

'Stop right here please Cabby!' shouted Mark.

The taxi slowly pulled up, wildly overshooting the specified place.

'Back about thirty yards please Cabby, I'll tell you when to stop… Stop!' Mark's specific instructions were unquestioned by the Cabby.

'Why so precise?' asked Sheridan.

'You mean you don't know? The extraordinary brains of Sherlock Holmes's son and you don't know?' jeered Mark.

The Cabby couldn't help but overhear. 'Sherlock Holmes, a son? Never!'

'No, you're right, impossible, he was gay,' said Mark, yielding to

recent popular belief.

‘Yeah, thought he was,’ said the Cabby.

‘You never did ask me what I do for a living. You don’t know much about me, do you?’ badgered Mark.

‘Well, you live on your own, that’s obvious. You’re not an office worker or customer-facing, you’re too scruffily dressed for that and your hands are too smooth to be a manual worker. No, you’re right, I know nothing about you,’ replied Sheridan.

‘Well, thanks for that defamation of my entire existence.’

Mark paused for a moment to regain composure, ‘I have my uses.’

Unlikely as it seemed, this was the makings of a close and long-lasting friendship, even if both were unaware of it. Eventually, Mycroft appeared. He was walking briskly in their direction wearing a bowler hat and carrying a folded brolly even though there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

Sheridan got out of the taxi, leaving Mark inside, ready with the door open.

‘Uncle! Fancy seeing you here,’ said Sheridan cheerfully.

Mycroft hardly had a chance to reply before he was ushered forcibly, into the cab. Sheridan had age on his side even though he was smaller in bulk than Mycroft – especially around the waist.

‘Help, help, I’m being abducted!’ Mycroft pointlessly shouted from within the cab.

The cabby wasn’t going to get involved and largely ignored what was going on in the back seat. As long as he got his fare, (which by now, was becoming quite substantial) he wasn’t particularly concerned.

‘You hooligans, help! Let me go!’ yelled Mycroft while at the same time, putting his index finger to his lips. Then, while still ranting, he gestured for their mobile phones. Mycroft continued to protest loudly until both batteries were removed.

‘What the hell kept you?’ protested Mycroft, now in a calmer voice. ‘I assume we’re in a blind spot?’

‘Yes, of course. London may have half the world’s CCTV cameras but camera 720c has a rotator problem. This spot isn’t covered. Head north please Cabby,’ said Mark.

‘I was beginning to think you were out to hamper us, but then I realised that it had to be you who removed the spark plug lead on

Mark's car. The perfect clue: a V8 running on three one side and four the other, said Sheridan.

'You pair of smart-arses. Morse code again – 'S' and 'H',' chided Mark.

'Okay, what's going on? We haven't much time, cards on the table!' demanded Sheridan.

'Possibly the most evil and powerful person modern life has had to contend with. Griselda Malvina, an assuming name that she most definitely lives up to. She makes old man Moriarty seem like a choir boy.'

'Malvina? Never heard of her,' said Sheridan.

'She controls just about everybody worth controlling: the government, the Royal family, the Councils, the Church. You probably heard about Terrance Daze?'

'Head of Scotland Yard?' suggested Mark.

'He refused to bow down to her demands,' explained Mycroft.

'Historical child abuse? I've had my suspicions for a while that something wasn't quite right in the upper circles. A few recent government decisions have been questionable, to say the least,' said Sheridan.

'Historical child abuse?' quizzed Mark.

'Yes, apparently, all it takes is two or three unscrupulous women to be bribed into making false accusations and you have the ultimate weapon,' explained Mycroft.

'Yes, I see what you mean,' said Sheridan.

'For an innocent man to be accused of H.S.A. can sometimes be worse than death. Career destroyed, suddenly loathed by the public, not to mention the prison sentence. Certainly, lamb to the slaughter,' said Mycroft.

'So, what you're saying is, everyone has to do exactly what this Malvina woman demands or the next thing they know is, they're accused of molesting a child, forty years ago,' said Mark.

'Well not everybody, mainly men of a substantial age and standing.'

'Like you then?' interrupted Mark.

'As it happens, that includes most dignitaries, much of the government, civil servants, high-ranking police and yes, me. Even the prime minister is terrified of rubbing her up the wrong way. The safest way for all concerned is to bow down to her evil whims and

cooperate.'

'A right fallen angel, then,' stated Sheridan.

'Yes, from the sound of it, she makes the wicked witch of the west seem angelic,' added Mark.

'Why can't you just lock her up and throw away the keys?' suggested Sheridan.

'If only it was that easy. Terrance Daze was in the best place to do that, but out of the blue, three women came forward to say he abused them thirty-five years ago. Others will now think twice. Of course, coerced accusations would most likely collapse in the fullness of time, but mud sticks, as they say – the damage is done.'

'Not to mention the trial by media,' said Sheridan.

The connection was subtle: One side of the coin; fabricated historical child abuse. The other side of the coin is the disappearance of seventeen people, not including Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. They seemed completely disconnected issues but they weren't. Amid all the false accusations targeted at innocent people, there were always the genuine cases – prominent people who *were* guilty of various heinous crimes including child abuse. They knew that life would catch up with them in the most distasteful way. There was nothing so certain. The extent of Malvina's perversion held no bounds. To add to her evil portfolio, conversely, she offered a comprehensive service to these people – the guilty. Naturally, she charged a very hefty price – almost every penny they had. This comprehensive service included their disappearance.

Whilst puffing heavily on his electronic cigarette Mycroft told these disturbing facts to Sheridan and Mark. A thick scented cloud formed inside the cab.

'Don't you want to know where we ended up with the *correct* code?' asked Mark.

'He knows exactly where we ended up, don't you Uncle? In fact, you know a lot more than you're making out. Crates of weapons and drugs?'

'Yes, we knew about the illegal consignment from our informants. With your impartiality, you were ideally suited to bring them to the police's attention. Sorry about that.'

'I suspected as much,' said Sheridan.

‘Thanks, Uncle!’ raged Mark.

‘Then there’s the little matter of the Caretaker at Bellington Hall. A caretaker with an Etonian tie? I assume you went to Eton? An old friend, was he?’

‘You definitely have inherited my brother’s talents. Yes, Philpot, he used to be my fag. He’s forgiven me since – I hope,’ said Mycroft remorsefully.

‘And Smallfoot? Come on, you could have done better than that. Micro FT?’ said Sheridan.

‘Micro F T? You’ve lost me,’ said Mark.

‘Think about it!’

While Mark slowly formed the word MICROFT in his head, Sheridan turned to other matters. In particular, why had his newfound uncle put Mark and himself to so much trouble?

‘Okay, so why the hindrance? Why put us through all that?’ berated Sheridan.

‘Forgive me, but I had to steer any unscrupulous interest away from you, and naturally, I had to see how you handled yourselves.’

‘Handle ourselves!’ snapped Mark.

‘So, you’ve been assessing us, testing us out, see if we are capable of following in our father’s footsteps. I’m not into playing games,’ said Sheridan sternly.

‘I know, I know, but I have a moral duty. You are family. The most dangerous task a computer programmer performs is pressing the delete key. You are now about to get embroiled with one of the most dangerous, evil, humans to have ever lived. If you couldn’t handle a few minor inconveniences there would be no point in you carrying on,’ said Mycroft solemnly.

‘Minor inconveniences? Being accused of being terrorists and being shot at with a blunderbuss!’ raged Mark.

‘Cool it, Mark. I suspected we may be put through some kind of initiation ceremony. So, have we cut the mustard then?’ asked Sheridan positively.

‘With flying colours, my boy.’

‘So, I take it, we’re going to Spitsbergen?’ suggested Sheridan.

‘How, in God’s name, did you know that? We eventually managed to identify a ship – The *Bol’shoy Meri,* Russian registered, we’ve been

tracking it by satellite. It's as you suggested, arriving at the Norwegian island tomorrow.'

'As you probably gathered, condensation on the windows of Bellington Hall steered us to the smuggler's tunnel. I found a fresh cigarette butt with a gold band in the cove – obviously Russian,' said Sheridan confidently. 'I checked for routes of any Russian ships that had passed near to that west coast. There was only one: destination Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen. But what confirmed it all was the earplug.'

'What the hell has an earplug to do with a Norwegian island?' protested Mark.

'Obvious really, an earplug found in one of the rooms and several bullet holes in the trees. Clearly, a lot of target practice was going on. Excluding going into a war zone, what else would you need target practice for?' quizzed Sheridan.

'I really don't know, please *do* let us in on your remarkable train of thoughts,' said Mark derisively.

'Of course, Polar bears! Well done, my boy!' cheered Mycroft.

Longyearbyen just happened to be the most northerly town in the world, situated deep within the arctic circle. A sparsely populated place with most of its buildings built on wooden stilts, raising them above the permafrost. As 830 miles of icy seas spaced it from the North Pole, it was not the most accommodating place to live, unless you happened to be a polar bear. Therefore, on all accounts, a perfect place to hide from the rest of the world.

All the evidence seemed to suggest that some, if not all of the nineteen missing people (including Holmes and Watson) were on board the Bol'shoy Meri, heading toward this most isolated part of the world. Why they were being taken there was, as yet, unknown. It was clearly a task for Sheridan Banner and his friend Mark Watson to investigate.

'Just a small question, how are we supposed to get there, and don't say by taxi.' snapped Mark.

'Fly there of course!' said Mycroft.

'Do we… get any financial help?' asked Sheridan tactfully.

'Sorry, I can't get involved, I'm already risking my career talking to you. You have savings, surely?' suggested Mycroft. 'I'm not forcing either of you to go.'

‘Typical, find out that I have a new famous father and immediately discover that I need a payday loan to pay for the privilege,’ said Sheridan.

‘Excellent chaps! You better get a move on. Apparently, only four days to go now,’ prompted Mycroft.

The taxi turned around and headed back to the exact spot in the centre of London where they had abducted Mycroft a short time ago. It resulted in over a £40 fare for no more than a few feet.

‘Help, help, let me go!’ bawled Mycroft as he scrambled out of the Taxi. It was a poor performance, but hopefully convinced any of Griselda Malvina’s advocates that happened to be in the vicinity.

Chapter 10
The journey begins

The extravagance of the previous night, staying at the luxury Savoy hotel, was a cruel tease. From now on they would have to dig deep into their own pockets. Travelling to the top of the world was going to be expensive. It seemed unfair but as Mycroft pointed out, they didn't have to go!

Getting to Longyearbyen was not particularly a problem. It happened to be Tuesday and the only weekly flight happened to be on Wednesday. They had to get to Manchester airport but before they did, they had to pack. This was easy for Mark, living on his own and being a free man, but Sheridan had to face Carol again. This was something he didn't particularly relish.

'Where the hell are you going to get the money from?!' berated Carol.

'I have savings.'

'WE have savings!'

'It's my destiny, to follow in my father's footsteps.'

'Listen to yourself, you're delusional. All this ridiculousness has gone to your head.'

'There are lives at stake.'

'Lives at stake and a useless computer nerd is going to save the world?' said Carol sneeringly.

'I think we'll end it there,' said Sheridan calmly.

Finally, she was showing her true colours. It was Carol that was having the affair and she was now punching below the belt. In a way, Carol's behaviour was making it easier for Sheridan. Perhaps that was her plan. If it was, it was doing the trick.

Chapter 11
Kidney beans

The long flight necessitated some reading material. A discarded newspaper would do fine. This was Sheridan's preferred way of passing the time. Mark, on the other hand, had the window seat and his idea of passing the time was to peer constantly through the triple-glazed hole in the fuselage. An in-flight meal passed some more time away and then Mark turned to snooping at Sheridan's newspaper which didn't go down well.

'Read the in-flight information or something,' growled Sheridan.

'Was just reading that bit about recalling nine hundred and fifty thousand jars of kidney beans.'

'Well, I hope they see sense before it goes that far.'

'Nearly a million jars. A colossal task, if ever there was one,' said Mark factually.

'Uncooked kidney beans are highly toxic, but clearly, that's not the case here,' said Sheridan.

'No doubt, you're going to explain.'

'David Reynolds reportedly died from eating kidney beans in a chilli con Carne, but clearly, his stepfather killed him,' explained Sheridan.

'Here we go.'

'Look at the evidence, David Reynolds aged 38. He lived with his mother and stepfather. He died Wednesday the 18th of February – pretty obvious don't you think?'

'What's obvious?'

'Come on, the date! The reporter states that he died from a meal, in particular, chilli con Carne, that he ate the previous evening. The previous day happened to be Pancake Day!'

'So? I see where you're going here but not everybody has pancakes on pancake day,' said Mark.

'Up North? Of course, they do! Take my word for it, they had pancakes, not chilli con Carne the previous evening. Anyway, look at the picture of the stepfather and mother – anything strikes you as

odd?'

'Nothing, other than he looks much younger than her.'

'There's promise for you yet, Watson. From the picture, he can't have been much older than his step Son. Blood is always thicker than water. Both Son and Husband being of similar age, in this case, seems to have caused immense rivalry and jealousy. Now, look at the stepfather's profession.'

'Industrial chemist, so what?'

'An ideal position to obtain phytohaemagglutinin acid – the poison in raw kidney beans.'

'Pure speculation,' said Mark.

'Pure drivel, but at least a few more minutes have gone by!' chuckled Sheridan.

This was Sheridan at his most irritating. Analysing snippets on television and in the newspapers and turning the facts inside out. Of course, there were other *snippets* going on around him, feeding his talent, that didn't go completely unnoticed. For instance, most of the passengers on the small commuter plane were not holidaymakers or tourists. All were well dressed, possibly retired professional people, totally quiet and blank-faced. No chatter, no smiles. They gazed into the backs of the seats in front of them not even bothering to adjust the airflow jets above them. To the keen eye, they all had one important thing in common; none of them wore jewellery, rings on their fingers, earrings, flashy watches or anything to give away their status in life. Sheridan expected this.

They were rapidly approaching the most northerly town in the world, a cold place at the best of times and everyone, without exception, appeared to be dressed inadequately. It has to be said that Sheridan and Mark weren't particularly prepared for the arctic climate either.

Longyearbyen was so cold that most of the ground was permanently frozen – permafrost. Unlike the polar bears where it was perhaps ideal in every way, this was not the case for humans. Certainly, a place you would only choose to live if the rest of your family lived there and refused to move somewhere warmer. A place you would only live if it was for a bet or if there was something very wrong with your metabolism. So why were all these passengers heading towards a fridge-freezer bathed in little more than twilight?

Longyearbyen was loosely termed as a tourist destination, that said,

there was a severe lack of poolside bars and sun-loungers. However, because it was a tourist destination, the novice sleuth and his partner were confident that they would find somewhere to stay. They didn't expect five stars, but perhaps a room with a sea view and an en-suite.

The plane landed on a short runway situated at a very barren, windswept part of the island. The airport building was basic and functional, lacking all the usual facilities. After a quick baggage collection and passport check, Sheridan and Mark soon found themselves outside in the freezing cold, insufficiently dressed and on their own. The cold air stung painfully, on their unprotected faces. An old, classic, Bedford coach with large studded tyres and a snowplough bolted on the front, awaited all the other passengers from the plane. Sheridan and Mark watched them climb on board and then depart.

'Now what?' asked Mark, trembling with the insufferably cold climate.

'We find a Premier Inn or Travel lodge!' said Sheridan enthusiastically.

'Okay, I'll go for that!'

Of course, this was entirely wishful thinking. They traipsed, shivering, across the hard ground and through many piles of drifted snow for almost three miles until they finally reached the sleepy town of Longyearbyen. This they shouldn't have done for two reasons: Firstly, they were a smidgen off dying from hypothermia and secondly, they would have been a tasty meal for any hungry polar bear that happened to be passing by. Fortuitously, they quickly came across a hotel and booked in. In her best English, the female receptionist asked them to kindly take their shoes off and then provided them with a pair of pre-warmed slippers.

Chapter 12
Violence

Three days to go.

By the next morning, they had just about thawed out. However, fully acclimatising to this new environment would take a lot longer than they planned on staying. Sheridan attempted to start a few conversations with the staff, but they all remained tight-lipped as to the mysterious events taking place on their doorstep. This proved one thing, there was something sinister going on – so sinister, in fact, that they were all terrified to talk about it. The majority of the clientele seemed to be ignoring the reserved attitude of the staff. They were determined to enjoy their holiday/break/excursion/visit, although secretly wishing that they had chosen Tenerife instead.

After a good night's sleep, they enjoyed a hearty breakfast – Norwegian style, mainly fish. A two-man snowmobile, salopettes and rifle were then hired, conveniently, all from reception. Many of the hotel staff tried to dissuade them from venturing off to other parts of the island, but they politely ignored their sensible advice.

'Places on this island are best avoided,' is all that they would say in the best Norwegian English they could muster.

Mark volunteered to drive the ageing but functional snowmobile.

Following the tyre tracks of the coach – the one they watched leaving the airport the previous day, was fairly straightforward. The studded tyres left two deep tracks in the hard snow. At this time of year, the sun failed to rise above the horizon, resulting in perpetual twilight. The single headlight of the snowmobile was a necessity.

'What exactly, are we hoping to find?' enquired Mark delicately.

'I have my theories, but they're far too incredulous to disclose at the moment,' said Sheridan.

Suddenly, after only a couple of miles, the reality of their perilous mission dawned, a bullet whistled past them, followed by the bang of a distant rifle. This could only mean two things, either someone didn't want them to be there or a polar bear was about and whoever was shooting at it was a terrible shot.

There were no polar bears about.

‘What the hell!’ screamed Mark.

‘Don’t worry, only a warning shot.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘Because neither of us has been hit?’ suggested Sheridan.

And then another gunshot was heard. This time the bullet hit the mudguard.

‘Ah, perhaps not warning shots. Seems like they’ve been tipped off. Can you see where the shots are coming from?’

‘That ridge over there I think, but I’m not staying around to find out,’ screamed Mark.

‘Calm yourself! Turn the headlights off, we’re like a beacon!’

‘Yes, but they’ll still hear us!’

‘Exactly, that’s the idea. It takes a few moments for sound to travel to that ridge. If we keep moving, they’ll be aiming at where we were.’

‘With you!’

As predicted, several more bullets whizzed past but hopelessly missed the intended target. It was a gamble, but they were hardly going to turn back now.

‘We’ll walk from here. We can’t be far away now,’ said Sheridan.

‘Far away from what? Something else you’re assuming?’ asked Mark.

‘Indubitably Watson, indubitably. According to the map, there’s only a couple of miles of this road left.’

‘Will you stop doing your father!’

It wasn’t a particularly pleasant walk. The winds howled around them and the limited daylight didn’t do justice to any scenery – if there was any. They stopped after half a mile and sheltered behind a large rock to have a warm coffee from the thermos. They were aware that true professionals would not stop for a coffee, especially on such a dangerous mission, but for now, they were amateurs and needed caffeine. Both quickly realised that everything in life is relative. They may have thought they’d been in some tight spots before, but this was on a different scale. No longer were they shivering from the cold but shivering from fear. Sheridan sat on the snow-covered ground, opened his rucksack and examined his basic map of the area. Mark decided to remain standing whilst trying to enjoy his coffee. Surprisingly, it was still piping hot. He closed his eyes tightly in an attempt to keep the cold from his eyeballs.

‘Just around that corner, I reckon. According to the map, there should be some old mine workings there.’

Sheridan’s voice suddenly became much more acute.

‘Watson, keep absolutely still!’

Mark hadn’t heard him due to the howling wind and the thick hood covering his ears. He didn’t hear Sheridan reach for his rifle or lift the firing pin either, but he did hear the gunshot which whistled past him and nicked the ear of an enormous polar bear about to share Mark’s coffee.

‘Holy shit!’ shouted Mark as calmly as he could.

The bear decided it was time to depart – without Mark’s coffee. No doubt his ear was throbbing a little.

‘Don’t mention it! Now, they’re certain to know we're coming,’ said Sheridan.

Sure enough, the sound of at least two snowmobiles suddenly surfaced above the howl of the icy wind. Intense spotlights cut through the snow flurries and murk. They were sure to see them in such a barren landscape.

‘Nothing else for it, we’ll have to bury ourselves,’ said Sheridan.

‘Not the best day of my life,’ moaned Mark.

This was a relatively easy thing to do in the drifts of new soft snow. Each quickly dug out a coffin-shaped hole and climbed in. Just as they covered the last few parts of themselves, the intense beams from the snowmobile spotlights dashed about the white reflective snow above them. They held their breaths and tried to control their trembling, caused by fear more than cold. Eventually, the piercing lights wandered off them as the snowmobiles continued along the route towards the town. Sheridan knew it wouldn’t be long before they discovered their abandoned snowmobile, then they wouldn’t be fooled again so easily.

‘Come on, we have to run!’ shouted Sheridan as he hastily emerged from his shallow grave, shaking the snow off.

‘Run? Now you’re asking too much!’ Mark protested.

A crucial mistake made on this venture was the choice of colour for their salopettes – insipid yellow. True, it was a vibrant colour to help the rescue teams if they got into trouble. However, in hindsight, greyish-white would have been a better choice at this moment in time.

Eventually, they cleared a rocky ridge and suddenly, a futuristic,

brightly illuminated building came into view. The closer they got, the more of the building's unusual features became apparent. It had to be seen to be believed. In the middle of nowhere, on an island so isolated, stood an ivory tower, an illuminated palace, a creation of intricacy and beauty. Pinpoints of multi-coloured lights illuminated the perimeter, adding a touch of extravagance. It could loosely be described as a sort of oil refinery dressed up in the style of a luxury Abu Dhabi hotel. Sheridan suspected what it all amounted to, but he was not ready to tell Mark just yet.

'We have three days to go. After that, we'll be too late,' said Sheridan, spitting snow out of his mouth.

'I know, but too late for what?'

'I suspect that many people are being put to death inside that building. Most of them are willing, but two people, in particular, are certainly not willing. We have to put an end to it,' said Sheridan determinedly.

'Willing?' questioned Mark curiously.

Mark was in no mood to ask more than one-word questions, for the moment. His lips were sore and his cheeks were frozen. Besides, just for once, he would really like to figure it out for himself.

It was an enigma, a riddle to challenge the most intelligent. A cryptic message planted a while back, in two mundane objects (chess pieces) which together, indicated a future date and a location. It was assumed that the date was a deadline, but for what? More than likely, for nothing good, an expiry date, a *dead*line in the most literal sense of the word. Then again, they may have had it all wrong. Perhaps it was a date for a party, a date for a concert or a business seminar. If it was a deadline for death, why would people willingly want to be killed and out here of all places? It only seemed to make sense to Sheridan. He had one word which would explain everything, but first, he had to get into the building to confirm his suspicions.

'If we're caught, it's over. We're as good as dead and so are our fathers,' warned Sheridan.

'Paint it like it is, why don't you?' replied Mark.

The final hundred yards approach to the building was completely out in the open. Countless intense spotlights shone out in all directions. It seemed an unobserved way in was impossible but Sheridan had a plan and the right moment had to be seized.

'Ever rendered someone unconscious?' asked Sheridan.

‘Eh?’

‘Knocked someone out?’

‘No, have you?’ asked Mark.

‘Of course, not, but how hard can it be?’

They were completely inexperienced in the field of combat, especially the violent kind. However, they knew the basic requirements. A heavy, hard object or a muscly arm with a sturdy fist attached to it, usually did the trick. They had none of these assets, but conveniently, they spotted a plentiful supply of wooden planks nearby, poking out of the snow. They were probably the remains of a building, long since disintegrated.

They quickly hid as best they could in a recess of a tall snowdrift. Moments later, the first of the snowmobiles carrying two men, screamed past them. They knew they only had a few moments before the second snowmobile would be hurtling along the same path. Hastily, several planks were buried, just beneath surface, in the path of the following snowmobile.

The whine of the second snowmobile’s engine indicated that it was approaching fast. Mark and Sheridan had armed themselves with the sturdiest planks they could find and waited. As predicted, the hidden pile of planks catapulted the men violently off the snowmobile. The vehicle skidded to a halt and the two men lay dazed on the soft snow. For two people who had not so much as stood on anyone’s toes before, whacking two dazed men on the ground in cold blood with heavy wooden planks, took a lot of fortitude.

Moments later, they had swapped clothes with the unconscious men and were seated on a rather superior snowmobile trying to work out how to start it.

Eventually, Mark found the start button and instantly they jolted off at breakneck speed towards the oil refinery / Hilton hotel – whatever it was.

Chapter 13
Burning cold

By luck more than anything, they were now in the right clothing and on the enemy's snowmobile. These factors made it possible for them to drive/ski/slide straight into the parking area of the building without suspicion. They pulled up right next to the coach with the heavily studded tyres and snow plough, jutting out at the front.

'Act casually, there'll be cameras on us – several, I should imagine,' said Sheridan, his heart racing ten to the dozen.

Before they reached the entrance door, the tannoy system boomed out angrily with some Norwegian command. One word sounded like 'scooter' and another 'park' with other unintelligible words in between. They glanced around and saw a group of snowmobiles parked neatly together a few metres from the coach. Mark waved casually and returned to the snowmobile. Eventually, he got it going and moved it over to the designated parking place. Sheridan shrugged his shoulders roughly in the direction of the CCTV cameras.

'Well, we've passed the first test,' said Sheridan as they casually entered the building.

The entrance door was an airlock affair, hermetically sealing the inside from the outside or vice versa. They now had some serious exploring to do.

'What exactly are we supposed to be looking for?' whispered Mark.

'I suggest we begin by looking for a basement!'

They entered a well-lit corridor, walled in some kind of opaque glass. Bizarrely, it seemed even colder than outside. Central heating had clearly been omitted in this Hilton hotel look-alike, in favour of a rampant air conditioning system. Fortunately, because of the extreme cold, no one it seemed, was lingering about to hinder their progress. They wandered freely but were fully aware that CCTV cameras were menacingly covering every move they made. Perhaps, they were being watched by someone somewhere warm and comfortable, but for now, no alarms were sounding. Despite the lack of central heating, there was no shortage of vertical pipes cluttering the walls. Mark made the mistake of touching one of them and burnt himself – not with heat but with extreme cold.

‘Ahh, should have warned you about that,’ said Sheridan sheepishly.

‘Look, this is ridiculous, are you going to let me in on your little theories or am I forever going to follow in your shadow, looking stupid and getting hurt?’ protested Mark.

‘Sorry, sorry, yes, you’re right, I’m being an arse.’

‘You said it!’ said Mark.

‘I suspect the pipes are carrying some kind of refrigerant.’

‘Refrigerant here, where it’s cold enough to freeze your nadgers off?’

There was no arguing the fact that it was noticeably colder inside the building than outside. The cold white LED lighting didn’t help matters, making it a very inhospitable place. After a few uneasy minutes and several corridors later, they came across an open door leading to a stairway going downwards into complete darkness. One scientific fact about a fridge is that the coldest part is at the bottom. This building, would, no doubt, follow similar protocols.

‘You’re not getting me down there, I’ve lost all feeling in my fingers and god knows if my toes are still attached,’ moaned Mark.

‘We need to know what’s down those steps.’

Sheridan began to descend into the blackness. He took a glove off to turn his mobile phone light on. His fingers instantly throbbed with intense cold. Hastily he replaced the glove. Mark followed behind him.

‘I wouldn’t go any further if I were you. Minus 160 at the bottom of those steps,’ said a tall man dressed in a black thermal suit. ‘I’m the caretaker by the way.’

‘Not another bloody one!’ sighed Mark.

‘I suppose you want to meet your fathers?’ suggested the caretaker calmly.

‘You know who we are?’ asked Sheridan, now rapidly ascending the stairs.

‘It’s my business to know who you are. We monitor all visitors to our island. We’ve prepared spaces for you,’ he said eerily.

‘Something tells me that ‘spaces’ has nothing to do with parking spaces,’ muttered Sheridan.

Both Sheridan and Mark independently thought about running for it but another two men in thermal suits almost magically materialised on either side of them. Fortunately for Mark, he was unaware of the

implications of having ‘a space’ prepared, but Sheridan knew exactly what it meant. They had come a long way to fall at the first hurdle. They simply had to get away.

Sheridan managed to wriggle free from their clutches, leaving Mark helplessly fastened to the spot by the two burly men. He momentarily glanced back as he fled and saw them injecting something yellowish into Mark’s neck. It was a torturous moment, fully aware that he was most probably leaving his new friend to the same fate as his father, but surely *one* escaping was better than none at all?

For now, Sheridan had seen all he needed to see. Somehow, he had to get out and back to the town. There, maybe he could get help and return to fight the foe. Then again, he could hide away, get drunk and wallow in his failure. After all, he was a computer programmer, hardly the man to thwart an evil international organisation single-handedly. He ran back down the same corridors and into the well-illuminated vehicle park. He knew he was only moments ahead of a small army of predators, therefore, he had to formulate a plan quickly. Unfortunately, his time was pointlessly used up with guilt from leaving Mark helpless and alone in the lion’s den. He looked on the bright side, at least by now, he would have been taken somewhere warm. It was a small consolation that he would hold onto. He hoped that the yellow fluid in the syringe was some kind of sedative and not a lethal concoction. It made more sense to be a sedative to keep him subdued and under control, as presumably, it had done with his father – and Mark’s father. This was the only explicable reason why they hadn’t tried to escape from Bellington Hall even though it appeared that they had a free run of the place.

As Sheridan still had the key, he used the same snowmobile they had arrived on a few minutes earlier. He quickly started up the noisy little engine and spontaneously a plan formed in his mind. It was just a matter of timing. He waited tentatively for the posse of predators to spill out of the entrance and then he opened up the throttle. The tracks instantly dug into the compacted snow and catapulted him forwards. He was risking being shot at, but he had a hunch that they wouldn’t use their guns too freely around the resplendent entrance of the building.

Sheridan had his work cut out. If he could make it to the cove where they had originally commandeered the enemy’s snowmobile, without being shot, maybe his plan could work. He drove the snowmobile as fast as he dared, across the exposed area in front of the building, then banked sharply around towards the ridge. The cove eventually came in sight, but the posse on their snowmobiles, was in hot pursuit, not

far behind. By the time he had reached the cove, he had managed to marginally open up a gap. Out of sight, tucked into the cove, he scanned around for the two men that he and Mark had previously battered with the planks. There were only the remains of one.

It was a gruesome sight but he couldn't dwell on it. It seemed that the polar bear who had earlier attempted to share Mark's coffee had returned, despite its wounded ear. Clearly, he (or she) had snacked on one of the bodies and taken the other away for afters. At least the remaining body was a lot lighter now, with both arms and a leg torn off. However, there was still enough left of him to perch on the seat of the snowmobile. Sheridan seated himself snugly behind the corpse, started up the engine and aimed the snowmobile towards the water's edge. Once momentum had sufficiently built up, he dived off the seat into the thick snow.

The posse arrived just in time to see a snowmobile rapidly disappearing into the icy sea, carrying one poor unfortunate person on board.

It was convincing enough. They almost expected it. A novice on a snowmobile, riding at excessive speeds, was bound to come a cropper and lose control at some point. The sea was unforgiving in this part of the world and would certainly provide a quick and painful death.

Satisfied that their prey (Sheridan) had met his end, the posse returned in a positive mood.

Chapter 14
A new friend

The reality was daunting. Getting any sort of help on a very cold, semi-dark, sparsely populated island, would not be an easy task. Most locals were surely aware of the Hilton hotel cum oil refinery, a mere five miles away from the town. He wondered if everyone on the island was on the payroll or just too terrified to speak up about it. Either way, it was a very scary place to be.

It was a new low in Sheridan's life. He was completely on his own, freezing cold and blatantly aware that at any moment he could be a tasty meal for any passing Polar bear. Consequently, the priority was to find a working rifle. He knew there should be at least one lying around somewhere nearby. An area scattered with pieces of human flesh in the red-stained snow was a good place to look. Eventually, he spotted the butt of a rifle sticking out of the snow. He emptied the snow out of the barrel and checked that it was still loaded – it was. Hopefully, he now had the means of preventing himself from being someone's dinner.

It was at this point that it dawned on him that he and Mark had indirectly killed, murdered, two people. However, there was no guilt and certainly no remorse. Not so long ago, spiders had been spared with a glass jar and a piece of card. Windows had been left wide open for flying insects to escape and mice had been trapped humanely. However, in contrast, the two now-dead men were asking for it. It was either him or them!

Now all murderous notions had been quenched, he turned to his mobile phone. He wondered if it would work, then he could ring someone he knew back home. As expected, it didn't, there was no signal, but suddenly, inexplicably, a text message came through.

'How the hell?' said Sheridan not knowing how he'd received a message while 'no network' was displayed on the screen.

'Mycroft here, how are you doing?'

He returned a text:

'On my own, Mark captured.'

‘Found out anything?’

‘Cryonics.’

‘Sending help. Where will you be?’

‘Hotel Splendid, room 28.’

A short text conversation with his new uncle, albeit to the point and lacking any glimmer of emotion, was enough to marginally comfort him. He was alone and helpless with no training for this sort of eventuality. Suddenly it dawned on him that this was the real world, a dangerous frightening world and his cotton-wool swaddling had come adrift. He always assumed he could cope with most things even a hostile wife having a steamy affair… with *‘Robert’,* but this was different. As his son, Daniel suggested earlier, this really was secret agent stuff. Then he read the string of messages again from Mycroft. He wondered if his side of the message had got through – it looked as though it had.

To add to the present misery, a blizzard had suddenly stirred up from nowhere. Walking the three miles back to the town would now be challenging at best. Only one thing for it, he had to find the hired snowmobile he had abandoned earlier. No longer did he feel the cold, he was now acclimatised in every way. It was getting late, he expected it to go dark, darker than it was, but it didn’t. The light stayed constantly dull but not dark. It was a very strange place.

He thought about the remarkable building. He thought about his theory, specifically cryonics, what else could it be? His theory went like this:

An agreement was made with the most depraved of criminals, including perverts, abusers and rapists. For them to be taken to an isolated place where the laws of distant lands are out of reach. Specifically, for the deeply guilty who want to escape any form of judgement and punishment.

Most likely, the sales patter from Malvina’s advocates:

Hand over all your money and possessions and we’ll place you in suspended animation. Peacefully asleep for hundreds of years, to be reawakened in a more advanced world where your crimes are forgotten about and all is forgiven.

Certainly, many important facts regarding long-term cryo-preservation would have been brushed aside with these criminals and immoral people. Like, for instance, a basic requirement to enter into the

preservation state is that first, you have to be thoroughly dead. All the blood has to be replaced with an antifreeze mix and then the body quickly chilled down to the temperature of liquid nitrogen. Then, revival is only possible when future technologies have advanced sufficiently to bring them back from the dead, which could be in hundreds or thousands of years' time – or possibly, never. Not to mention, the chances of the cryo-preservation equipment they were being placed in, going the distance and being maintained properly. All highly unlikely.

However, the cryptic data deep within the chess pieces seemed to suggest that cryo-preservation eventually had success. How else could a future date and specific location be predetermined if not from the future? So far in the future that a form of time travel technology existed to return the chess pieces, containing the data, back into the past. The upshot of this was that his father, Sherlock Holmes evidently must have been placed in suspended animation. Presumably, when eventually woken and brought back from the dead, many centuries from now, he would see to it that the codes are sent all the way back to the primitive twenty-first century.

Yes, definitely hogwash. A ridiculous concept. However, it would have to suffice until Sheridan found a realistic explanation.

This aside, there were still three days to go according to the deciphered code. Could this date be when the cryonic process would begin? In which case, saving Sherlock and Dr Watson would certainly create a paradox if time travel was to be believed!

Finally, Sheridan found the abandoned snowmobile. It struggled to start, but eventually, the two-stroke engine burst into life. It was his new friend, a noisy, uncomfortable motorbike on skis but never-the-less it offered solace.

After ten minutes or so, the town came into view. Yes, it was full of foreign-speaking strangers, but the town itself was a friendly sight – a gathering of multicoloured timber buildings hovering above the frozen ground.

He returned to the hotel and made a detour straight into the restaurant. After a hot tasty meal, he settled down in his room and watched Norwegian television. Somehow, he managed to put Mark completely out of his mind and eventually drifted off to sleep on his comfortable bed. His job was done. After all, Mycroft did say he was sending help. It was now time for the professionals to move in.

Quite possibly he would have remained in this state until the next

morning but his slumber was disturbed by a text message dingle on his phone followed by a heavy knock on the door. He read the message as he went over to the door.

'RUN! £40.65. Mycroft'

'Damn! Hang on, just putting some clothes on,' Sheridan shouted towards the door.

But he lied, he was dressed and was now donning his padded clothes like a fast change artist.

£40.65 was the cost of the taxi in London. Only Mycroft would know that. This implied that the last message from Mycroft was bogus with the intention of revealing where Sheridan was staying.

Fortunately, his room was on the ground floor but unfortunately, the hotel along with all the other buildings in the town was built on posts or stilts. The drop was substantial, but the snow beneath cushioned his fall.

It was late evening, but still not dark, still the same perpetual twilight, it was bizarre.

There had to be a pub somewhere. There's always a pub of sorts in any culture, in any town.

It wasn't long before Sheridan found perhaps the only inn in town. It was debatable if it had any Michelin stars but was inviting and warm and that was all that mattered. He ordered a pint of Norwegian larger in his clearest English. He was surprisingly successful. Then he sat down at an empty table and unzipped his salopettes down to his waist. If anyone did come for him here, he hoped he would have a good chance of escape – again. Spitsbergen larger was different but pleasant and the limited number of clientele smiled and raised their glasses to him. He was beginning to settle – his heart rate slowed – the adrenalin in his veins dissipated. He wanted to be alone for several reasons but mainly because he couldn't speak a word of Norwegian. He closed his eyes and had a long sip of his drink. By the time he'd opened them, he had company.

'Hallo… er du… English?' she asked hesitantly.

A pretty young woman in her thirties, pale complexion and short blonde hair had silently sat down opposite him.

'Yes?' said Sheridan, predicting that that was the correct reply.

'Noticed your Jasper Conran shirt, Doc Marten's and Cotton Traders jumper.' she said, speaking in perfect English accompanied by a penetrating smile.'

Sheridan wasn't going to be outdone. He examined her in a non-invasive way.

'So, an archaeologist, no doubt studying the permafrost. Apparently, you work with an elderly chap who smokes a pipe. You've been here about three weeks, you had tomato soup for lunch… Oh, and you have an eight-year-old niece.'

'Seven, herregud! Wow, you're good, a right old Sherlock Holmes, aren't you?! Actually, I completely made up the clothes thing. I heard you order your drink – unmistakably English.'

'Unless of course, that's all a cover and you're actually a secret agent?' added Sheridan.

'Secret agent? Now that would be something to live up to,' she said brightly. 'You look as though you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.'

'Funny you should say that.'

'A problem shared is a problem halved you know… I'm Greta.'

'Sheridan… Can I get you a drink?'

'Ol kan du… beer please.'

Sheridan tried saying '*oh khan di'* to the barman but he just looked at him with a glazed expression.

Sheridan tried again, 'beer for the lady please?'

'Small or large?' said the barman.

He couldn't for shame say small. Greta widened her eyes as she was presented with a huge glass of beer.

'A dilemma. If I'd brought back a small glass you might have thought, tight Brit. But getting you a bath full of beer you're probably thinking I'm trying to get you drunk,' said Sheridan.

'So, what makes you think I can't take a bath full of beer?' asked Greta with a rascally smile.

'There's no way out of this, is there?' conceded Sheridan.

'No. Tell me then, what's all this weight on your shoulders?'

'You don't want to know,' said Sheridan dismissively.

'Try me, it's something to do with that facility a few miles along the coast, isn't it?'

'You know about that place?'

‘Everybody knows about that place. It’s the main thing people talk about around here.’

‘Isn’t anyone concerned?’

‘Of course, they are, but what can they do? Besides, a few folks around here have made a comfortable income out of the place.’

‘They kill people there,’ said Sheridan curtly.

‘Kill people at a pharmaceutical facility?’ said Greta incredulously.

‘Pharmaceuticals? Where do you get that from?’

‘Common knowledge, antibiotics. I’ve seen the vans loaded up on the way to the airport!’ said Greta agitatedly.

‘Well, trust me, it’s a front. I’ve been there. It appears to be a cryonics facility and there’s evidence that they’re putting people into suspended animation.’

‘Cryonics? Freezing people, and keeping them frozen!?’

‘Exactly! They have my father, my colleague and his father who are now being prepared for the process. I narrowly escaped.’

Of course, for now, what Sheridan believed was mostly circumstantial. Actually, he had no concrete evidence that it was a cryonics facility. Yes, there were the pipes with liquid nitrogen flowing through them and a basement 160° below zero but that was hardly enough to assume human beings were frozen there. He had seen the vacant facial expressions of the people who were taken to the facility on the old coach. Was it their chosen destiny to be cryogenically frozen? However, there was still no satisfactory explanation for the missing people including his and Mark’s fathers.

Greta’s cheery demeanour dissipated. She listened quietly and intently to Sheridan’s harrowing account over the last few hours. Spontaneously she placed her hand over Sheridan’s hand and squeezed it. Sheridan was conscious of the warmth of her skin on his as he continued. He could have gently moved his hand out of the way but he didn’t. He needed her company, he needed her warmth… and he needed a bed for the night.

Greta was very astute, very observant. Certainly not in Sheridan’s league but certainly an improvement on Mark and altogether better looking. She had to admit that Sheridan’s experiences far surpassed any excitement brought on by Norwegian permafrost and working with an old, boring professor.

When Sheridan’s tale was concluded, he moved on to tell her about

his wonderful children and then his estranged wife. This may have been a foolish thing to do, but honesty was always his way. He wasn't the most skilled when it came to chatting up other women but somehow, they gelled like butter and toast.

Sheridan wasn't blind to the fact that she was very attractive in every respect. Her shapely figure was apparent through the thick layers of clothing and her natural beauty shone through in the poor ambient lighting. Clearly, she wasn't one to use these assets to entice. Above all, she wanted genuineness, intelligence and kindness. Sheridan didn't immediately realise it but he had all these qualities.

This had never happened to him before, but it was all so natural, no awkward moments, never stuck for words. They finished off each other's sentences and then eventually, impulsively, out of the blue, they clumsily kissed. It was spontaneous and followed on from a mutual laugh from a joke that no one else in the room could possibly have understood.

Chapter 15
Weakest link

Sheridan felt guilty, but he could live with it. Mark was held captive, presumably sedated and possibly alone. Sheridan was in a comfy bed with a beautiful young lady by his side. They made love, probably fell in love and then went to sleep in each other's arms.

The next morning, still twilight, they both woke, entwined together. He had planned on waking earlier, slinking out of bed, getting dressed and leaving without disturbing her. However, he desperately wanted help, there was little he could do alone, but he couldn't possibly place Greta's life in danger.

'I have to try again,' said Sheridan determinedly.

'I'm coming with you,' said Greta.

'Forget it, it's far too dangerous.'

'Exactly, you need help. Just because I'm a girl… I happen to be a fourth-degree black belt. There, that's surprised you!'

'I don't particularly want to start attacking people,' said Sheridan uneasily and then he remembered the two men who ended up as a tasty dinner for a polar bear.

'Come on, think positive! Two are always better than one. Together, we can do it,' said Greta excitedly.

This time there had to be a proper, well-thought-out plan. Looking back at his first blundering visit, it was inevitable that someone was going to get caught. In fact, it was amazing that Sheridan managed to escape their clutches as easily as he did. Blatantly entering the building without a proper thought-out plan was never going to achieve a satisfactory result.

'You're not very good at this sort of thing, are you?' stated Greta tactfully.

'Of course, not, I'm a computer programmer!'

'Well usually, in a situation such as this, you have to find a weakness and then you exploit that weakness,' said Greta.

‘Yes, yes! Brilliant, you’re right!’ Spontaneously, a plan formed in his head. He gave Greta a quick kiss on her cheek.

‘Oh, is that all I get?’ complained Greta sweetly.

This was all new to Sheridan. It dawned on him with a softened blow that his existing marriage was light-years from being ideal. He made a swift deduction that making love was not just having sex. They were two distinctly different things. Having sex with Carol – he tried to remember, was more animal urge than passion. Having sex with Greta was infinitely more… everything. It was blatantly clear that they had bonded and quickly reached the wonderful precipice of their emotions as only nature had intended. Love songs for the first time in Sheridan’s life were meaningful and poignant. He gave her a more lingering kiss.

‘That was nice,’ she said in such a way that it was an understatement.

‘Now then, where was I?’ said Sheridan, emotionally recovering.

‘Weakness, we’re going to find a weakness… What exactly *is* their weakness?’ probed Greta.

‘The abundance of bright lights and the refrigeration plant must take a hell of a lot of electricity. So, where does it come from?’

‘The town’s electricity supply?’ suggested Greta.

‘Doubt it, six miles away and far too unreliable. Anyway, I would have noticed evidence of overhead cables. Only one possible way I can think of, they must have their own generators.’

‘Ah, but generators generate heat do they not?’ suggested Greta.

‘Good thinking, undesirable heat. Stands to reason it’s distanced someway from the cryonics building.’

‘Not to mention the engine noise,’ added Greta.

Sheridan pulled Greta’s head towards him and kissed her forehead, ‘God, we work well together!’

‘Told you we would. There’s your weakness then. Find the generator and Sabotage it!’ said Greta oversimplifying the matter.

‘We need my map and skis!’ said Sheridan.

‘And a rifle!’ added Greta.

Chapter 16
Familiar shoes

Suspiciously, the location of the cryonics facility was hidden from Google Earth's prying eyes with a conveniently placed fluffy cloud. Fortunately, Greta just happened to have access to military satellite photos of the island on her laptop – all strictly for official geological purposes. After considerable zooming in, the cryonics facility could clearly be seen along with a smaller building about 200 metres behind it. This had to be the generator.

Their best and probably only chance of succeeding with this daring and dangerous mission was to approach the complex from the rear. However, there was a small problem with this plan. The route to the rear had a medium-sized mountain in the way.

It was another exceptionally cold day and the winds were even stronger than the day before. The hired snowmobile would certainly have its work cut out, scaling the mountain with two onboard. Sheridan steered the machine and Greta tightly hugged him from behind. Apart from anything else, it helped to keep each other warm. The first couple of miles were a breeze with the buzzy engine being unfazed by the steady climb. However, the gradient began to steadily increase until eventually, the snowmobile's tracks could no longer grip on the compacted snow. Sheridan tried zigzagging up the hillside but the tilt became too precarious. They had no alternative, they had to get off. The machine was parked on a small ridge hoping that any wandering polar bear would keep his paws off it.

They had become chilled on the snowmobile but now exerting themselves with the arduous climb, warm blood rushed through their veins. Sheridan quickly discovered that Greta was exceptionally fit, leaving him struggling to keep up. The skis became heavy on their shoulders as did the cumbersome rifle. Spotting the occasional Polar bear tracks made them realise that 'cumbersome' was perfectly okay.

Eventual after nearly an hour, they finally reached the summit. In different circumstances, the views would have been spectacular but blizzard conditions reduced the visibility significantly. The other side of the mountain down towards the complex was considerably steeper than the ascent. Despite being highly perilous, skiing down the slope was the only option. No matter, they were committed, they weren't

going back. The snowmobile left on the ridge on the way up would just have to be collected at a later time.

Despite the poor visibility, the glass palace/cryonics facility with its excessive lighting stood out like a beacon in the distant valley beneath them. Another building distanced from the main complex, contrarily, was unlit and barely noticeable, camouflaged in the white snow.

'There, the generator building!' yelled Sheridan above the howl of the wind.

'Come on then, let's get our skis on!' Greta shouted back.

The last time Sheridan attempted to ski was a humiliating experience twelve years ago on a holiday with Carol. He had managed to completely vanquish her from his mind but suddenly she surfaced like a sea mine having its tethering rope cut. Then, they hadn't long been married, they were sort of happy and it was way before the children had arrived on the scene.

Sheridan was no skier, that was obvious. His feet simply refused to behave themselves when attached to two long appendages. Steering and braking were out of the question, he just had to go for it and let fate take over. Predictably, Greta was a natural. If she wasn't such a lovely beautiful person, and that they'd slept together, and that they functioned on the same wavelength, and he needed her like oxygen, by now he would have been seriously irritated by her perfection.

Sheridan did his best to keep silent, but with the speed he attained, almost terminal velocity, he had to scream a little. Greta gently zigzagged down the impossibly steep hillside as though she was in an Olympic slalom. Sheridan obviously couldn't do this so he just pointed his skis and hoped for the best. His plan was to stop by sitting on his bottom at the appropriate time.

Sheridan accomplished the descent in record time (if there was a record for this particular mountain). Eventually, he came to a standstill a whisker away from the generator building, using every part of his body as a brake. He was way ahead of Greta, giving him time to regain his composure, stand up and dust the gathered snow out of his crevices. Greta gracefully drew up and stopped right next to him in a textbook manoeuvre.

'That was incredible,' she said. 'Thought you couldn't ski?'

'Funny ha, ha! A wonder I haven't broken my neck… and my legs… and my back!'

As they suspected, it *was* the generator building. The hum of the diesel engines gently resounded around the nearby snow-covered slopes and

occasional clouds of smoke bellowed out of the two exhaust pipes on the roof. As to be expected, the entrance door was securely locked.

‘We’ll have to get on the roof,’ said Sheridan.

‘Good idea,’ said Greta.

Greta climbed on Sheridan’s shoulders and eased herself onto the roof. He followed as best he could with Greta pulling him up the last few feet using the butt end of the rifle.

‘Keep your fingers away from that trigger,’ joked Sheridan.

‘I suppose now would be a good time, if I was double-crossing you,’ said Greta coldly.

She stopped pulling him up. Sheridan's spirit immediately drowned. His heart raced. Was this chance meeting too good to be true?

Time almost came to a standstill. He waited for her to move her finger to the trigger as he hung helplessly on the barrel. Sheridan had to start trusting people.

‘Come on, put a bit of effort into it,’ she scolded.

A few seconds later they were both standing on the roof of the building.

‘You had a moment there, didn’t you,’ said Greta angrily.

‘To be honest, if you were on the payroll of that place over there, pulling that trigger would have been the best thing you could have done,’ said Sheridan truthfully.

Greta gave him an affectionate hug. Several inches of clothing got in the way but it was something she had to do and Sheridan welcomed it.

‘Right, let’s block up the exhausts,’ chirped Sheridan.

Each pipe had a floating flap on the top to stop rain and snow from entering. All they had to do was hold the flaps down. This was harder than expected, the exhaust pressure was significant but with all their weight, they managed to hold them down. Slowly but surely the engines slowed, then suddenly choked and stalled.

‘Quick, pile snow down the pipes,’ said Sheridan. They scooped as much loose snow as they could off the roof and dropped it down the pipes.

‘They’re not going to restart too easily now!’ said Sheridan.

Greta glanced towards the main building.

‘They’re coming!’

As expected, all kinds of alarms must have indicated the generator failure in the main building. Immediately, engineers were on their way to investigate the problem.

They had to get off the roof quickly and hide their skis. The disturbance in the loose snow was impossible to hide. The guards would know immediately that the generator had been sabotaged.

‘What do you think, Kung Fu or taekwondo?’ asked Greta.

‘You do what you want. I’m going to use the blunt end of this rifle,’ said Sheridan.

‘Fair enough,’ said Greta.

They hid as best as they could around the side of the building and waited for the maintenance team to arrive. Two men drew up on a snowmobile. As expected, they were suspicious of the freshly disturbed snow. One of the men got on his radio. He repeated the word several times which sounded like *Eastbourne*. Sheridan knew it had to mean something other than a seaside town in Sussex.

‘They suspect it’s a polar bear,’ whispered Greta.

Fortunately, they were engineers, not heavyweight bodyguards but Sheridan still trembled like a twig in a gale. Whether it was through fear or exhilaration he wasn’t sure, he tried to analyse the moment. He could be seriously injured or even killed in the next few moments, but it beat, hands down, sitting behind a desk, bashing keys on a keyboard for most of the day. They waited, with bated breath until they sensed the two men were together.

Greta pounced first, high kicking one of the men on the chin with such a force that a few teeth splattered out as he fell to the floor. Sheridan thwacked the other on the head with the rifle butt. This just dazed him so Greta finished him off with a Kung Fu chop to the neck – accompanied by the customary ‘hiii-yah’.

‘I wouldn’t like to argue with you,’ said Sheridan.

‘I’ll teach you if you like?’ suggested Greta.

‘How long would that take?’

‘Ten years,’ said Greta.

‘You’re on!’

In one of the engineer’s pockets, they found the key to the generator door. Inside the building was pleasantly warm with the residual heat

from the diesel engines. After dragging the two engineers inside, they removed their jackets and for good measure, their padded trousers. Wearing the engineer's yellow padded jackets with furry hoods, complete with identity badges, would help them blend-in, later on in their mission.

Greta stripped down to a tight-fitting black thermal suit which looked in every practical sense like a leotard. It revealed her perfect, sylphlike athletic figure. As a contrast, Sheridan stripped down to his hipster underpants and thermal vest, proving if nothing else, that he was conventional and well prepared.

'God, it's hot in here,' commented Greta.

'Thinking the same myself,' said Sheridan.

A message came through on the engineer's walkie-talkie – in Norwegian.

'He's just asked how long to fix the generator. Put on your best Norwegian accent and say, tea-mini-ter!' said Greta.

Sheridan pressed the speak button and said exactly that.

'I presume I said ten minutes?'

'Is that long enough?' asked Great as she eased her arms out of her thermal suit.

'Well, it's going to have to be. Naturally, certain stages will have to be bypassed.'

'Something we'll have to make up for it later,' said Greta.

No doubt about it, Sheridan was rapidly breaking out of his long withstanding shell. For much more than ten minutes they did what came naturally. It was never less than passionate, energetic and intense. It had never, ever been like this with Carol – never like this with anyone.

Roughly, twenty minutes later, both engineers simultaneously began to stir. Greta reapplied her technique to their necks which put them out again and then she put her thermal suit back on.

Over the last few minutes, they had ignored several messages on the engineer's walkie-talkie but finally, the message they wanted to hear came through – which roughly translated as:

'For xxxx's sake, get that xxxxxxxx generator working, the xxxxxxx backup power supply has now xxxxxxx failed!'

Without generator power or backup power, the external and internal

lighting of the main building failed, leaving only a smattering of emergency lights. Consequently, chaos and disorder ensued. Unnoticed, a snowmobile carrying Sheridan and Greta, dressed in the engineer's clothes, pulled up at the rear entrance. In the half-light, nothing looked untoward. The padded, hooded jackets and trousers covered most of them up. They knew it was now or never.

Sheridan took a key card out of the pocket of his borrowed jacket and swiped it through the lock. A moment later, the rear glass doors silently slid open. Several people were dashing about in a blind panic. Fortunately, they blended in, unnoticed, wearing the appropriate clothes and identity badges.

'So far so good,' whispered Sheridan. 'Now, all we have to do is find where they're keeping my father, Mark and all the others.'

'No problem,' said Greta optimistically.

'We've *got* to find them today or it will be too late.'

Greta looked puzzled at this fact. Sheridan had purposely avoided telling her about the cryptic information from the chess pieces and there was a good reason for this. She was undoubtedly the best thing that had ever happened to him. He had fallen, head over heels for her. They had gelled, clicked and all the other things that happen when you meet someone so perfect and lovely. The last thing he wanted to do was jeopardise all that with a ridiculous theory about time travel and 'information from the future'. It was, of course, a ridiculous notion, completely improbable and implausible, but, for now, it was the only explanation of the facts. Another thing he had avoided was telling Greta who his father was. Ironically, when they first met, she had accused him of being 'a right old Sherlock Holmes'!

Sheridan had an uneasy feeling about being in the very same corridor he was in, less than twenty-four hours ago. Then, it didn't go too well at all. Then, he narrowly escaped, leaving his friend and companion behind to face the consequences. Then he hadn't met Greta and wasn't in love and hadn't had sex for six months. Now, as he roamed about in dark corridors, he felt far more confident, especially with a Kung Fu, Tia Chi, ju-jitsu, karate expert closely by his side.

'Heat rises. Logically, the living quarters should be at the top of the building,' said Sheridan quietly.

'I love it when you say that,' whispered Greta.

'Say what?'

'Logically. One of Sherlock Holmes's favourite words.

‘Really?

‘I’m not ashamed to admit it, my all-time hero. I know all his cases off by heart.’

Sheridan purposely raised his eyebrows. Greta was in for one hell of a surprise.

‘Quite some footsteps I have to follow in then?’

Sheridan knew no truer words had ever been spoken.

They were uncertain how many stories the building had – possibly three. Logically the top floor would be the warmest where most of the occupants were. The corridors were in semi-darkness although there was still sufficient light to see where they were going. A smattering of natural light entered through the many-tinted glass windows to assist the emergency lighting. They were fully aware that it was not too dark to be recognised as intruders. They had negotiated the ground floor and the first floor without incident, but their luck didn’t last. A man in a white overall was hovering at the top of the metal staircase on the second floor. They froze in their tracks.

‘Erik, er at du?’ he shouted down into the semi-darkness below.

Sheridan didn’t need a translator; he wasn’t Erik but decided not to disappoint him.

‘Ya!’

This was one of the few Norwegian words he knew. The man at the top of the stairs ranted a couple of sentences and then beckoned Sheridan up the stairs. He did as he was told. Fortunately, the chap hadn’t counted on a one-woman army, Greta who was sneaking up behind Sheridan. Inevitably as they got closer, the man realised that he wasn’t Erik. He had a chance to cry out before Greta knocked him out cold with the full force of her foot planted squarely on his chin.

‘How do you get your foot up that high?’

‘One of my many talents. Better come up with something quickly. We’re no match for a small army that may be about to descend on us,’ said Greta.

‘He’s dressed like a doctor,’ said Sheridan.

‘How come he’s got a gun then? I thought doctors generally abhor violence?’ suggested Greta naively.

‘I don’t think he’s your normal run-of-the-mill doctor.’

Sheridan took a lingering look at the *doctor’s* gun before passing it to

Greta and then gently pushed the *doctor* down the metal staircases,

'With little sympathy, they watched the poor chap rolling head over heels into the darkness of the floor below.

'Well, he's not going to wake up for a while,' stated Greta.

Sheridan quickly took off his padded jacket, 'Stick the gun in my back, make out I'm a troublesome patient.'

At that moment, a nearby door burst open. Greta was prepared.

'Annen pasient!' She bawled assertively.

Surprisingly, the gathering of people at the door accepted the situation and then promptly dispersed. Another doctor or scientist in white overalls approached Sheridan with a syringe. Naturally, he didn't particularly want a neck full of sedative. This was where the charade had to end. Greta swung around and thrust the gun into the doctor's back.

'Stille!' Greta whispered, firmly.

Sheridan snatched the syringe from the doctor and in a continuous motion, stabbed and squeezed it into his bottom. He was about to yell out but Greta waggled the gun and repeated her instruction. Moments later the doctor was out of it, calmed and lost in his thoughts.

'Wow, a powerful sedative,' commented Greta.

'I suppose it has to be, to keep so many under complete control – especially my father!'

'I'm looking forward to meeting him, sounds like quite a character,' said Greta, still completely unaware of who he actually was.

Greta eased the sedated doctor onto a chair and handed him a chart to read. To continue with the charade, Sheridan also began to act all wobbly and sedated, necessitating Greta's guidance and support. This little performance seemed to allay any concerns from the several bustling staff, allowing them to get on with their pressing duties.

Now they had a chance to look around. A large, ultra-modern hospital ward came to mind. Several white-overalled doctors or scientists, wearing surgical masks, were frantically weaving about, attending to their patients who were all neatly sitting up in bed. These regimented patients had several tubes attached to them. On closer inspection, it was inaccurate to call them patients. 'Patients' usually implies that they are alive and perhaps recovering from whatever illness, injury or operation they had endured. The blue-grey colour of their skin and their inactivity indicated that they were all beyond care – they were

all clearly dead. Their insipid colour suggested a complete absence of blood flowing through their veins. To verify this, large containers on the right side of them, contained all their discarded life-giving red stuff. As a replacement, sachets hanging from dispensers on the left side of them, emptied blue liquid into their veins.

'Antifreeze,' whispered Sheridan, 'in preparation for cryonics.'

'Oh my god, you were right, they are killing people here! They really do have to be dead then?'

'Yes, before they can go through with the process. It's a one-way trip.' Sheridan had a good scan around the room. 'We have to find my father, Mark and his father before they get this irreversible treatment.'

'How do you know it's not already too late?' asked Greta.

Sheridan looked at his watch, 'we still have 40 minutes.'

Greta gave him another puzzled look, 'If I didn't know better, I'd think you'd got some kind of crystal ball.'

'No, but I had a chess piece,' explained Sheridan.

It would have to do for now. There wasn't time for a more in-depth explanation. The reduced emergency lighting had been in their favour but now they were beginning to attract attention.

Two unfortunate events now happened: Firstly, the lights came back on – evidently, the generators had been repaired and restarted. Secondly, several menacing armed staff/guards burst into the room. Sheridan and Greta were overpowered and helplessly apprehended. Some snitch had obviously pressed a silent panic button.

Sheridan's world came crashing down. They were compromised, caught and out of luck. It was pointless in fighting. They braced themselves for the sedative injection. Greta was first. A man in white overalls, wearing a mask and familiar shoes, promptly stuck a needle in her neck. Now it was Sheridan's turn and then it would be all over. It had been another brave attempt to thwart the plans of this evil organisation, but again he had failed. In seconds his wonderful new life would be crumbling, he would be drugged and oblivious to the goings-on, on this remote island. He tried a last attempt to escape, but he was held too firmly to escape the needle. He did notice, however, that the liquid in the syringe was clear, not yellow.

Sheridan waited and waited for some sort of sensation. Greta looked at Sheridan and Sheridan looked at Greta. Nothing happened. What should they do? Complain that the sedative wasn't working? Demand another dose? Sheridan looked at the doctor who had administered

the drug – he winked.

All Sheridan could see were his eyes. His mouth and nose were covered with a surgical mask and his hair was covered with a cap. Even though the eyes were familiar, it was his shoes that gave him away. Both knew they couldn't say anything, they had to maintain the charade. One thing for sure, whatever was injected into their necks was definitely not a sedative.

Sheridan knew exactly what he had to do. It was his turn to wink followed by another impromptu performance. His eyes fluttered, his facial expression went blank and his shoulders dropped. Greta immediately realised what he was doing and followed suit. Perhaps Greta's zombie act was slightly overdoing it but it was equally as convincing.

Sheridan had a hundred questions, but it wasn't the time or the place. The pretend doctor, who conveniently happened to be Mark, led them to a door at the far end of the room/ward as quickly as they were able with their pretend impairments. A long empty corridor greeted them. Just as Sheridan was about to explode with gratitude, Mark glanced upwards at a security camera.

'Don't think they're listening in but keep up the zombie act,' said Mark, moving his lips as little as possible.

'How the devil? Sheridan whispered. '…This is Greta, by the way.'

'Hi.' said Greta, still acting like a zombie, albeit it, badly.

'Er, hi,' replied Mark awkwardly.

'It's alright, he starts off miserable, but after a while, he turns quite pleasant,' said Sheridan apologising for Mark.

'Thanks! As I was about to say, years on Propranolol must have given me some kind of immunity. I managed to disable my auto-injector a few hours ago.'

'Auto-injector?' quizzed Greta.

'All the '*clients*' are wearing them, it keeps them in a constant sedated state. One of the doctors is now wearing mine. Swapped his clothes,' explained Mark.

'How come you haven't aroused suspicion?' asked Sheridan.

'Obviously, I know how to look like a doctor.'

'Well, it's good to see you, dear friend,' said Sheridan, clearly containing his feelings.

‘You too. What took you so long?’ snapped Mark.

At the end of the corridor, they entered a large, restroom with many wing-back chairs. In the space of one short corridor, seemingly, they had walked from a hospital to an old-folks home.

It was an unnerving sight. Possibly as many as thirty highly sedated men and women. Some were sitting and some moving about slowly, in a trancelike state. Sheridan recognised some of the faces as the missing people who had been featured in the daily papers, but his father was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was hiding somewhere, fast asleep in a chair.

Sherlock Holmes and his partner John Watson were prominent people. Unquestionably, they carried celebrity status. So often were they seen on television and in the newspapers that Sheridan knew exactly what they looked like.

‘Where are they then?’ asked Sheridan enthusiastically.

‘They have to be somewhere in here, saw them earlier on – both out of it,’ said Mark.

‘We have 30 minutes left,’ Sheridan reminded him.

‘My God! It takes a good thirty minutes to carry out the transfusion. They’ll be in one of the preparation rooms…’ shrieked Mark.

‘Preparation room? Definitely a misleading name for such a gruesome purpose,’ said Greta.

No one said anything, they knew she was right. Sheridan had to formulate a plan and quickly.

‘Do you know where they keep the sedative?’ asked Sheridan.

‘Benzodiazepine, yes, in the storeroom, that room over there.’

‘Well, we need lots… and syringes.’

Moments later they were back in the corridor. They had precious little time. The overwhelming evidence was that Sherlock Holmes and Mark’s father were now in one of the preparation rooms, about to be prepared for the deadly cryonics process. The preparation consisted of their red blood being drained and replaced by a blue antifreeze liquid. Following that, they would be dressed in a special airtight suit. Although replacing their blood with antifreeze would, naturally, prove fatal, it was a necessary process to preserve the tissues. Then they were committed – a one-way trip. Their revival would only be possible if or when future technology had sufficiently advanced to bring them back from the dead.

Sheridan, Mark and Greta naively thought of themselves as a formidable force as they boldly negotiated the corridor. No longer did they have to act as though they were sedated. This misplaced attitude was wholly down to Greta who was certainly a force to be reckoned with. Sheridan and Mark were essentially vulnerable and inexperienced, but it would be ill-placed to dampen their spirits… and steal their thunder.

Along the length of the corridor were entrances to two more-or-less identical preparation rooms. They had been in the first room earlier and their fathers were not in there. They had to be in the second room. The door to this particular preparation room was secured with a keypad lock.

'Quickly Mark, the code?

'How the hell should I know!' snapped Mark.

'You must know. How did you manage to get about?'

'People just opened the door for me. I made a point of always having my hands full. After all, I couldn't just ask for the door code, in English. I think that may possibly have aroused suspicion. Something that might help though it sounded like *Frere Jacques* when they pressed the keys.'

Sheridan produced his mobile phone and proceeded to press a few keys.

'Like this?'

His phone played a familiar tune.

'Yes, yes! Frere Jacques, Frere Jacques.'

'Eight numbers then?' said Sheridan anxiously.

'Try it, what's the worst that can happen?' said Greta.

Sheridan carefully and firmly keyed in 1, 5, 9, 1, 1, 5, 9, 1, miraculously, it buzzed. Suddenly and conspicuously, they found themselves in another identical preparation ward. The room, or ward, had eight well-spaced hospital type beds, each containing a sedated occupant. Four doctors attended to the eight patients. Their principal tasks were to insert the intravenous tubes in their arms and monitor their heart rates. The doctors didn't seem to be a threat, but the alarm had been activated. No doubt beefier guards would soon be on the scene. Greta stood by the double doors at the other end of the room, waiting for the assailants to arrive. She suspected that this time, she would need more than kicking feet and chopping hands. She armed herself with something hard, long and heavy – a metal screw-on-leg

off one of the tables. Sheridan's and Mark's job was to administer the sedatives. Mark had become a dab hand at giving injections. Sheridan held the first doctor as still as he could while Mark injected the drug.

'Luft… air bubble!' yelled a struggling doctor, just before the needle pierced his skin.

'Oh, yes, sorry,' apologised Mark.

By the time the second doctor had received the needle, the other two doctors had managed to escape into the corridor. Then, inevitably, mayhem ensued. Four burly guards entered through the double doors. Greta was in fighting form. Two were quickly unconscious on the floor, but the other two were not such a pushover. Unfortunately, she had dropped the long, hard, table leg on the second swipe and now her feet and hands were swishing in all directions.

'A little help, boys, if you can spare the time?' said Greta, between blows.

Mark picked up the leg and whacked a guard from behind. Only one guard left to deal with now but he appeared to be the burliest of all of them. Greta's kicks were bouncing off him and his neck was made of some kind of rare earth metal. Mark had clumsily dropped the table leg which had rolled inconveniently under a bed. It was now or never.

Sheridan tapped the remaining guard on the shoulder from behind, he turned around and received one of the hardest punches outside a professional boxing ring. The guard was knocked out cold.

'Ow! That hurt,' said Sheridan, nursing his knuckles.

'Wow, where did that come from?' praised Greta.

Now they had the room to themselves – apart from eight patients and two sedated doctors.

It was a surreal moment.

Sheridan discovered his father sitting up in one of the beds. It was the first time he had seen him in the flesh – which was now becoming slightly purple. He was still alive, but only just. Partly through rage, partly impulse, Sheridan ripped the tube out of the bag containing a bluish liquid – the antifreeze. He examined the equipment on a table next to him and quickly rotated a switch marked 'flow direction'. Immediately the blood that had been sucked out of his father's body into a container was now flowing back into him. Bluish liquid now began to flow out of his body, out of the severed tube, making a hell of a mess on the white laminate flooring.

Meanwhile, Mark had found his father, he too had a purple

complexion but evidently more advanced. Mark did more or less what Sheridan had done, but the blood leaving his body was already contaminated – a mixture of blood and anti-freeze. It was no longer a simple matter of reversing the flow and putting his blood back.

'Oh, God! It's too late!' Mark cried out.

'He needs a blood transfusion. It has to be your blood,' said Greta softly.

'Do it, all the equipment is here! I'll talk you through it,' said Mark.

'I'm quite capable, I was qualified as a nurse,' said Greta.

'Do it then, quickly!'

Realistically, they had no time to perform such a complex procedure but they had to try. Greta confidently slid a catheter into a prominent vein in Mark's arm, connected it to a tube from the transfuser and reversed the flow. Mark knew he could only spare one litre of blood at the very most. He dearly hoped that would be enough.

Suddenly, two more guards burst into the room, this time they were armed. Immediately, several bullets started flying, fortunately missing Greta, Mark and Sheridan but hitting one of the sedated doctors and a corpse sitting up in bed. Sheridan sheltered behind a cabinet and Greta behind an upturned desk. Greta managed to rearm herself with the heavy, hard and long table leg. One of the guards approached. She was prepared and whacked his ankles with such a force that it knocked him off his feet. Another swift thwack and he was out cold. The other guard fired a shot at Greta and missed again. He closed in on her and fired another shot. The bullet caught the arm of her jacket. Sheridan patiently waited for the right moment. The guard was tantalisingly close. Before a shot could be fired, Sheridan had toppled the cabinet onto him, pushing him to the floor. Greta was already with her table leg *weapon* and struck again. The armed guards had been thwarted with relative ease. It was inevitable that success could go to their heads.

And now the formidable trio was armed.

By now, Mark had given over one litre of blood. He was beginning to feel distinctly faint and his heart rate had become alarmingly high. His father was not responding. He was still a worryingly blue colour, still motionless. The irrefutable evidence was completely disregarded. It was too late, he was dead, icy cold and ready for the cryonic process.

Greta approached Mark. She winced with pain from her arm for a moment then stoically brushed it off.

‘Mark, it’s too late, I’m so sorry. Let me take the cannula out,’ said Greta softly.

‘No, no, a bit more,’ said Mark.

Sheridan checked on his father, he was responding well and was slowly emerging from his sedated state. He then took a deep breath and walked over to Mark.

‘My friend, this is the way it always had to be. One of our fathers had to die.’

‘What the hell are you on about?! We’re here to rescue both our fathers, not just yours,’ Mark scowled.

The messages from the chess pieces, only one explanation, when you’ve eliminated the improbable, whatever remains, however impossible must be the truth.’

‘Yes, yes, stop indulging in your father’s quotes,’

‘It’s not my father’s quote, it’s my own!’ said Sheridan with a degree of pomposity.

‘I see, clever, you swapped improbable and impossible… Hang on, your father’s quote? Sherlock Holmes? No way, no, you can’t be?’ said Greta, shocked and dumbfoundedly.

She paused a moment to look across at Sherlock Holmes, now with his colour returning. She recognised her long-standing hero. She looked at Mark’s father, now distinctly bluish, she recognised him too – Doctor John Watson.

‘You’re Sherlock Holmes’s son?’ Greta quizzed softly.

Sheridan didn’t answer her, what could he say? He hoped a warming smile would be a sufficient response.

Perhaps it wasn’t the best time to reveal to Mark the incredulous and improbably conclusion, but Mark had to be told.

‘Last night I sent a text to Mycroft to get him to carbon date the chess pieces. He’s sent me the results this morning,’ said Sheridan.

‘Well, don’t keep us in suspense,’ said Mark curtly.

‘Seven hundred and twenty years…’ said Sheridan.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, that’s the thirteenth century,’ snapped Mark.

‘No, the other way, the twenty-eighth century.’

‘That’s claptrap!’ Mark raged.

‘I know, exactly what I thought, and still think, but for the moment it’s

the only explanation. A code, ensconced deep within two chess pieces, that relate to a location and a future date and time when one of our fathers will die? Barring any magician's trick, the chess pieces had to be sent from the future.'

'What, you're saying my father is brought back to life over seven centuries from now?' scorned Mark.

'Far enough into the future where they have rudimentary time travel technology plus sufficient medical advancement to revive one of our fathers. Only then can the message be sent eight hundred years back in time. At least one of our fathers had to die to send the cryptic message back or there would be a paradox,' explained Sheridan.

'Paradox?' quizzed Greta.

'An inconsistency. Look, it's one explanation, not one I'm happy with, but until I come up with something more plausible, you'll just have to go along with it.'

Mark momentarily pondered on Sheridan's theory, his inescapable logic, his deceased father and the hidden code in the chess pieces and then rapidly came to a sensible conclusion…

'Get this bloody tube out of my arm!'

Greta obliged and swabbed his arm with cotton wool.

'You did your best. Don't want to lose you as well as your father.

Mark couldn't reply without becoming emotional, he just nodded. Greta smiled sweetly at him.

Needless to say, however contentious this cryonic facility happens to be, it has to remain operational and we have to get out of here. Unfortunately, there's something we've got to do before we leave. There was something else in Mycroft's message this morning,' said Sheridan cagily.'

'Go on…' said Mark warily.

Chapter 17

Everest is no mountain

Sheridan took a deep breath. He knew what he had to say wouldn't go down well.

'We have to rescue someone called Everest Pritchard in the restroom. Apparently, he's also here against his wishes.'

'You are joking? We'll be lucky if we get out of here as it is!' snapped Mark

'Yes, I'm fully aware of that, but apparently, he has evidence to put Malvina behind bars, forever. He's the lead our fathers were following. We're obliged to finish off what they started.'

'Just when you think things are going so well,' grumbled Mark.

Now there were four of them, three of which, were not in the best of shapes. Mark was clearly weak from pointlessly donating at least a leg full of blood and to make matters worse, there were no biscuits or tea to assist his recovery. Sherlock Holmes was still seriously suffering from the effects of long-term sedation and Greta suddenly collapsed on the floor.

Sheridan rushed to her side and immediately spotted the red-stained sleeve of her jacket. He pulled her arm out of her jacket, as gently as he could. She had a bullet wound just below her elbow. He carefully folded up the sleeve of her thermal suit to reveal the shallow wound.

'You've been hit, why didn't you say?' said Sheridan, deeply concerned.

'It's only a graze Mr Holmes, didn't want to make a fuss,' said Greta gallantly.

Fortunately, it *was* only a nick but quite a deep one. Within a couple of minutes, Sheridan had cleaned the wound with antiseptic spray and taken the top off a small capsule of superglue.

'You've got to be kidding!' snapped Greta, sharply recoiling.

'Always carry superglue with me, it's the new Swiss army knife. A thousand uses. Grit your teeth, this is going to sting a little. Hold your arm up high.'

Sheridan carefully coated the surrounding skin with glue and squeezed the wound together. He had no idea if this was accepted medical practice, but in a second or two, the skin had bonded, and, as to be expected, his fingers were also stuck together. He applied a bandage and she was as good as new. Greta gave Sheridan a quick affectionate kiss.

Inconveniently, it was her chopping and slicing arm. Her kung-fu moves would now be severely restricted. On the upside, two guns were commandeered from the guards. Greta had one and Mark had the other. He examined it – it looked familiar. It happened to be the same as the ones he saw in the crate at the docks. Sheridan, the most physically able, had the metal table leg. They didn't exactly inspire confidence. Certainly no crack fighting force, but at least, now with Sherlock in their group, they had enough combined sleuthing powers to solve any mystery put before them.

They hobbled, winced and staggered back into an empty corridor. This was fortunate as they were in no state for any confrontation. Once back inside the restroom, Sherlock was encouraged to sit down in one of the comfy chairs – he didn't argue.

Everest Pritchard, the one they had to rescue, now had to be identified, but easier said than done. The problem was that everyone in the room was heavily sedated. Everest Pritchard was in no fit state to jump up and identify himself.

'No point in asking them, they're all well out of it,' said Mark.

'Well at least we can eliminate the women,' said Greta.

'You'll have to text Mycroft for a description,' said Mark.

Sheridan conceded that it was the best way forward.

'Description of Everest Pritchard required asap.'

Greta and Mark were puzzled as to how Sheridan was able to send a text message with apparently no mobile phone signal.

'How…'

'I'm on EE, seems to work out here… There, sent!' said Sheridan smugly.

They all hoped Mycroft was on the ball with his phone at hand, as they had very little time. In fact, no time at all as several guards could now be heard running down the outside corridor.

'Our best plan of action is to shelter behind the clients; use them as human shields,' suggested Sheridan.

‘You think they’re bothered if their clients get killed? It’ll save them a job,’ scorned Mark.

It was a good point. There had to be a reason why this organisation of disrepute, with evil Griselda Malvina as the mastermind behind it all, didn’t simply behave dishonourably, cheat and kill all the clients. After all, she now had all their wealth, jewellery and other assets. That was part of the deal and in return, they would be given the whole package – the highly expensive cryonic process. But what was stopping her from just telling her clients what they wanted to hear, let them sign a few forms and then, further down the line, kill them? However, there was every indication that they were doing it properly. The well-equipped wards, the cryonic chambers beneath the building, the remote and concealed location. They didn’t have to do any of this. Naturally, Sheridan had already thought about this inconsistency and had an explanation.

The door burst open and several frenzied armed guards, piled into the room. As Sheridan predicted, no shots were fired for fear of hitting the clients – even though they were desperate to shoot at something. This time, amongst the group of guards, there was a familiar face, the Caretaker.

‘You may as well give up. We have you surrounded.’

‘What, give up and be cryogenically frozen to death?’ said Mark.

‘Well, that’s not exactly correct, is it?’ said Sheridan pedantically.

‘Here we go again!’ Mark groaned.

‘I just needed to clarify the point… We won’t be frozen to death, we’ll be frozen *after* death’ said Sheridan condescendingly.

‘Why, why, for God’s sake do you have to always do this? Always put me down, especially in front of complete strangers,’ said Mark.

‘I don’t *always* put *you* down, you do that yourself. I could correct you on most of the things you say. I just choose to correct the obvious gaffs.’

‘That’s it, I’ve just about enough of your patronising cynicism. You got me into this mess because of your incompetence and impetuousness.’

‘Incompetence? Well, that’s rich, there’s only one…’

‘Ahem!’ interrupted the Caretaker. ‘Could you possibly continue your juvenile quarrelling at some other time? I’m becoming a little tedious of your antics. We are at a critical time with our clients.’

The banter went well but it was never more than a distraction. Whilst

Mark and Sheridan were tearing into each other, Greta had taken the opportunity to sneak around the back of the wingback chairs and was now ready with her gun, for a rear surprise attack.

‘We have who we came for, Sherlock Holmes, my father. Why don’t you just let us go so you can get on with whatever you’re doing here,’ said Sheridan.

‘You know exactly what we’re doing here, that’s why we have to keep you here – forever. Think of yourselves as privileged: To be brought back to life just over seven hundred years’ time when there’s immortality, a life of perfection, wonderful new technology and no illness. It’s a painless process and we take good care of you,’ said the Caretaker.

That was it, the caretaker had confirmed what Sheridan had suspected: the reason why they couldn’t just cheat and kill their clients and why the clients had to go through with the cryonic process. There was a lot more to the *contract* than the clients merely giving up all their money and possessions. They had a job to do at the other end!

Sheridan’s phone vibrated.

‘Okay Greta, do your stuff!’ said Sheridan.

In an instant, Greta had her gun in the Caretaker's neck and her finger dangerously hovering over the trigger.

‘Tell your men to drop their guns,’ she said with her roughest voice.

‘Better do as she says, a bit of a psycho, this one,’ said Sheridan.

‘Drop… your… guns!’ said Greta as gruffly as possible.

Several seconds of stubborn hesitance passed but eventually, they did as they were told. Greta continued to hold her gun, menacingly prodding into the caretaker’s neck. Sheridan took Mark’s gun and doubled up the gun threat. Naturally, Sheridan or Greta hadn’t any intention of firing the weapons, but the Caretaker and the guards didn’t have the benefit of this fact. Mark equipped himself with more sedative and syringes and began injecting. A couple of guards protested and then writhed about until Sheridan fired a bullet into the ceiling. Unfortunately, it was such a poor shot and so exceedingly off course that it knocked a hat off one of the guards. Mistakenly, the guards thought it was a good shot and surrendered to the needle.

Shortly, they were all heavily sedated. They would be out of it for a good two hours.

Sheridan received a text:

‘Spectacles, balding, moustache, M.’

It wasn’t a lot to go on but using the techniques of the “*Guess who?”* game, they narrowed the choice down to just two. Two men who wore specs, were bald and had a moustache. They had to be revived.

‘We could do with something to counteract the sedative,’ hinted Sheridan.

‘Flumazenil,’ was uttered from the direction of a wingback chair. It was Sherlock Holmes, almost back in the land of the living.

A reunion was long overdue…

‘Apparently, I’m your Son, Sheridan,’ he said calmly.

‘You have your mother’s nose.’

‘Is that a good thing?’

‘It was her worst feature.’

‘Thanks… Dad!’

Sherlock stood up, now much steadier on his feet.

‘Tall like your mother, too.’

They hesitated awkwardly for a few seconds and then spontaneously man hugged each other. It was thirty years too late, but better late than never. The sedative had apparently made Sherlock uncharacteristically emotional. Just like before, thirty years ago, a tear formed in his eye and flowed slowly down his cheek. Sheridan was not in the right frame of mind to be emotional. A week ago, he had no intention of looking up his real parents. A week ago, he was perfectly unhappy, not enjoying his job, not enjoying his life and in complete denial that his wife was having an affair. Now, absolutely everything had changed.

‘By the way, he said over seven hundred years, you missed that one,’ said Sherlock.

‘Actually, no I didn’t, I suspected as much. The clients are signed up to some kind of contract when they are eventually revived. You could say they will provide foresight.’

‘Foresight, now there’s an interesting concept. How invincible we would be with the benefit of that,’ said Sherlock profoundly.

Meanwhile, Mark was already on the case. He was already injecting the reversing drug, Flumazenil, into the two semi-finalists of *guess who?*. Sherlock also got a jab. The drug took effect almost immediately. Mark asked them their names.

The one who didn't say Everest Pritchard got a double dose of sedative.

Chapter 18
Inhibitions

There were now five of them: two old men, two not-so-old and Greta.

‘Better let the psycho go first,’ said Greta in the same gruff voice.

‘It worked didn’t it?’ said Sheridan nonchalantly.

After boldly negotiating a warm corridor, then down a steep flight of stairs into a cold corridor, then down another steep flight of stairs into a freezing cold corridor, they found themselves at the entrance of the building. Fortunately, everywhere was deserted, but they firmly believed they could have dealt with it if it wasn’t. There was a reason for this confidence: Mark and Greta were armed. However, precariously waving the guns around, as they did, unnerved all concerned, not just the enemy.

They proceeded through the glass, air-lock entrance, into the equally cold outside air.

‘Head for the old coach over there,’ instructed Sheridan.

Assuming vehicle thieves were somewhat of a rarity in such a godforsaken place, Sheridan was banking on the old Bedford coach being unlocked with the keys left in the ignition. Fortunately, they were.

Sheridan could pat himself on the back. So far, he had had some degree of success, but the mission was far from over. However, on the bright side, everyone apart from Mark’s father was alive and kicking. With the help of Greta, he had rescued Mark, *his* father and Everest Pritchard, the man who had information to put the evil woman, Malvina, behind bars.

He handed Mark the keys and sat next to Greta in the seat behind the driver’s seat. Now he had two reasons to smile: pride and the new love in his life.

‘No regard for my weakened state then?’ Mark grumbled.

No answer was forthcoming, he was driving. The bus fired into action and after a little crunching of gears, lurched across the car park and headed in the direction of the town. As yet, no one was following. Thanks to Mark’s skills with the hypodermic, many of the guards were

sedated but it wouldn't be long before they would have company. They had very little time to distance themselves from the enemy and regain their composure.

'How's your arm?' asked Sheridan gently.

'Fine, although I think my thermals may be permanently bonded to my skin, it's something I can live with.'

Sherlock Holmes was sitting in the seat behind and overheard them.

'Interesting. Affection, intimacy, physical attraction and you're both married, but not to each other,' Sherlock deduced.

'Yes, father.'

Sheridan was not yet completely comfortable with the paternal reference.

'We're having an affair, my wife's having an affair and… Greta's husband is also having an affair.'

'How… how did you know? I thought I hid all the signs.' 'I have a confession to make.' said Sheridan tentatively.

'Go on.'

'I Googled you.'

'You did what?'

'Your impressive display of skiing earlier today confirmed my suspicions. You were far too good to be an amateur. I assume that Greta Stabbart, the name you use now, is your maiden name. The name you used in the last winter Olympics when you skied for your country, was Greta Witheren, your married name. The first time I saw you, I thought you looked familiar. What other reason would a former Olympian and a beautiful one at that, come here for six months on an archaeologist expedition?'

Greta didn't say anything for almost five seconds – it seemed much longer.

'I had to get away – needed time to think. To be honest, when I found out… about *her,* I was more humiliated than upset. You tend to lose your confidence, lose your grip on humanity when such things happen. The laughable thing was that the candle went out years ago. Our marriage was on the rocks long before he started being unfaithful.

Nothing needed to be said. She rang so many bells with Sheridan's own experiences. But now he had broken out of his shell. It seemed that so had Greta.

Meanwhile, the coach careered on, crunching through the frozen drifted snow with its heavy studded tyres. Perhaps there was a proper tarmacked road somewhere beneath them if anyone cared to dig down to find it. The coach headlights reflected harshly off the falling snow, severely reducing visibility. Mark knew once they reached the sanctuary of the town, they would be out of danger but there was still a long way to go.

Due to the relatively slow pace of the coach and the high speeds of a snowmobile, it wasn't long before they had unwanted company. Four snowmobiles menacingly approached. Several bullets pinged off the sides of the coach.

'They don't particularly want to kill us, I reckon they just want Everest back,' said Sherlock.

'How can you be so sure? They're real bullets!' yelled Mark, now swerving the coach from left to right.

'Griselda Malvina is their employer and probably their worst nightmare. Most of them would rather die than suffer the consequences of failure. If they let Everest escape, their lives won't be worth living. The wrath of Griselda holds no bounds,' explained Sherlock.

Everest Pritchard hadn't said much up to this point. Naturally, he seemed thankful to be out of the *house of death* and free from sedatives in his veins, but it was abundantly clear that there was something very odd about him.

'Just get me back to England and I'll sort things out, you'll see, I'll sort it all out,' said Everest in an unusually squeaky voice.

'England is a long way off. Don't get your hopes up just yet,' said Greta as she stumbled down the aisle to the rear of the coach.

'The problem is getting Everest to the right people, not ones corrupted by Malvina's influence. Open the back window and aim for their fuel tanks!' shouted Sheridan.

A rear tyre on the coach was hit. It deflated with a bang. Fortunately, there were twin wheels on the back axle so it didn't slow the coach down. By pure luck, Greta retaliated and got a direct hit on a fuel tank. One of the snowmobiles exploded spectacularly.

Another of the snowmobiles managed to get up alongside the coach. Mark yanked at the steering wheel. The coach swerved violently, knocking the rider off into the hard snow.

'Yes!!' everyone but Everest cheered.

Now, only two men on snowmobiles remained. The coach offered reasonable protection from their bullets but the tyres remained the weak spot. Another flat tyre could bring the coach to a halt and that would be the end… of everything. The riders now wisely kept their distance from the side of the coach, snaking about to avoid another fuel tank explosion.

Greta and Sheridan fired several times, out of the rear opened window, but with the coach buffeting from the uneven snow-covered track, they completely missed their targets. They were now down to two bullets each - they knew these had to count. Both of them had another attempt to hit the snowmobiles but completely missed again. They were now down to one bullet each.

'Not as easy as I thought, getting a bullet to go where you want it,' said Sheridan.

'Lose your inhibitions. You're missing because subconsciously you don't want to hurt them. Aim for their heads,' said Sherlock.

'Sheridan, take the controls! I've got no inhibitions, they killed my father,' shouted Mark.

Sheridan moved to the front of the coach, took over the controls and gave Mark the gun with one remaining bullet. Mark positioned himself at the opened back window, held himself steady, aimed at one of the rider's heads and pulled the trigger. Of course, he missed the rider entirely but hit the fuel tank beneath him. It was the second of the snowmobiles to explode spectacularly and throw the rider several metres into the wayside. Greta was impressed, she handed Mark her gun for a repeat performance. Again, he aimed at the remaining rider's head and pulled the trigger. Predictably, he missed completely, not even the machine suffered. That was it, no more chances, no more bullets. If they still had the long hard table leg, Greta could have thrown it at the snowmobile but with the current level of success, most likely, she would have missed.

'Now what do we do!?' screamed Greta.

'We're stuffed,' said Mark, not quite as loudly as Greta.

Sheridan had his foot to the floor, swerving from side to side as he careered along the snow-covered track. It seemed blisteringly fast but barely 50 kph registered on the speedometer, certainly not enough to shake off the highly agile snowmobile. The rider only had to get one clear shot at a tyre and the coach would certainly grind to a halt. With no bullets left, the rider with his gun would have the upper hand.

It was all down to Sheridan. An idea formed in his head. The coach

had studded tyres that provided exceptional grip on the compacted snow.

‘Okay, everyone, hold on tightly to something solid,’ Sheridan instructed.

Using the rear-view mirrors, he waited until the snowmobile closed right in behind the coach. The moment arrived – Sheridan stood as hard as he could on the brake pedal. As predicted, the snowmobile smacked hard into the back of the coach, catapulting the rider many feet into the air. Spontaneously, everyone on the coach cheered.

‘Everyone okay?’ asked Sheridan in a leadership tone.

No one dared say they weren’t.

‘Where to now?’ asked Mark.

‘Thought we’d borrow a boat,’ said Sheridan.

Chapter 19

Marry us

Sheridan, still at the wheel, juddered the old Bedford coach (with excellent brakes) to a halt. Finally, after a hair-raising few miles with a blown-out tyre and several bullet holes, it had successfully reached the relative sanctuary of the town. He glanced as unemotionally as he could at Greta, it was her stop, right outside her hotel. Undoubtedly, she was the most wonderful person he had ever met but despite their brief, incredible adventure together, he hadn't forgotten the fact that she had another life. Over the last few hours, she had been a Kung Fu Ninja-warrior, an Olympic skier, a lover and a good friend. However, the reality was that she was an archaeologist on a lengthy scientific expedition. Presumably, she had her commitments and her own life to slot back into.

Greta got out of her seat and Sheridan's heart sank. He would never see her again, she was Norwegian and he was British – not exactly within walking distance of each other. Before she reached the exit door she paused and turned towards Sheridan. She had something relevant to say.

'A new candle is burning,' she whispered in his ear and then returned to her seat.

Sheridan smiled and engaged a gear. For the first time since he moved away from his childhood years, tears formed in his eyes, not of sadness, but happiness. As he lurched the coach into motion again, he did his best to blink them away. Conveniently, no one saw the tears. Stoic self-control remained impeccably intact. The coach continued on its way, passing through the town he had so briefly become acquainted with. All its distinctively painted timber buildings, so cold, so isolated but so full of nice warm friendly people.

No one said anything for a while but they all had serious reservations about his idea of borrowing a boat.

Sheridan parked the coach beside the harbour. It wasn't what they expected: a smattering of pontoons with a few small fishing trawlers tied up to them. Further along the harbour, three large container ships towered far above the quayside. The trawlers were intended for day fishing trips – not exactly what Sheridan was planning. Sherlock informed them that it was five hundred miles to the nearest country

which happened to be North Cape – the top of Norway. They would need extra diesel, food and water. Weather permitting, it would take at least two days to get there. However, there were more pertinent problems. For a start, no one knew how to operate a fishing trawler. Even if someone did manage to figure out how to sail/pilot/drive it, no one knew how to navigate precisely 500 miles across a cold and unforgiving Barents Sea. In all respects, it would be far more practical and safer to steal one of the larger container ships. At least then there would be plenty of fuel onboard for when they inevitably got lost. They thought about doing this for almost two seconds and then unanimously decided that borrowing any sort of boat, ship or trawler was out of the question.

They needed a skipper.

His name was Marius. Greta smiled at the name and sheepishly looked at Sheridan. That was the friendliest bit about him, the rest was rough, smelly, unshaven and rude. He had a boat – a trawler, perhaps bigger than most, moored up on the pontoons. He agreed to take them all the way to Hammerfest, North Norway. There, there happened to be a busy airport with regular flights home. This was good, exactly what they wanted. Exactly what he wanted was 30,000 Krone for his services. This was not good. Only Greta knew how much this was, she did a rough conversion in her head.

'That's… £3000!'

'Take it or leave it,' said Marius in his version of English.

Of course, no one had 30,000 kroner or 3000 pounds sterling or, as he preferred, 4,500 American dollars. However, Mark was wearing an Omega watch.

It wasn't one of his best days. First, he had lost his father and now he was about to lose his gorgeous, precious, extremely expensive timepiece.

Then it got a whole lot worse. Once onboard, they realised that there was nowhere to rest or sleep – well there was if you could tolerate a bout of dysentery. The Skipper had a good excuse – there was no washing machine or tumble drier on board. How could he be expected to wash his bedding? Still, only two days to endure the filth – how bad could it be?

Mark reluctantly handed over his watch. Without hesitation, Marius started the engine and began casting off. Before anyone could change their minds, the trawler was rapidly chugging out of the harbour into the unforgiving sea.

The Skipper's new Omega watch looked the business on his hairy, grubby wrist.

The first day on the water wasn't too bad. It may have been icy cold above deck, but below, the heat from the inboard diesel engine made it almost bearable. The sea was relatively calm but Mark still insisted on feeling seasick. He was encouraged by all, to go above deck just in case he unintentionally added to the objectionable qualities of the cabin. Reluctantly, he made his way to the stern of the boat where he propped himself against the railings. He stared, despondently, into the wake of the propeller. After a while, the skipper joined him. He spoke in his best English.

'Better ways to do it than jump in there,' said Marius.

'No doubt there is… Just a bit queasy. Need a bit of fresh air. Had your trawler long?' asked Mark as politely as he could with his stomach-churning.

'Eighteen years.'

Mark wanted to ask if he'd ever washed the duvet cover during that time but thought it might be inappropriate. The mere thought of the duvet added to his nausea.

'You're from the Ice palace?' asked Marius.

Mark immediately knew what he was referring to. 'You know about that place?'

'The locals call it the *Slott*. Evil place, we keep away,' said Marius.

'Must bring business to the island, though?' suggested Mark.

'It does now and then, mostly though, it brings trouble.'

'Yes, it certainly does,' said Mark thoughtfully.

'You don't smile,' said Marius.

'Just lost my father in that place,' said Mark, maintaining his composure.

'Oh, sorry to hear that.'

Despite his appearance and extortionate charges, the skipper was apparently, almost human.

'Don't be, he caused me nothing but trouble for most of my life. Probably better off without him.'

'That is not the truth, you are grieving,' said Marius profoundly.

A strong gust of wind brushed past them. Mark tightened his grip on the railings.

'A storm is approaching, best get down below,' said Marius.

He wasn't imagining it; a storm was approaching. The sea had been as calm as a millpond, but now the trawler began to sway about on the roughening sea. The sky appeared brighter although angrier – perhaps in part, a consequence of sailing southwards. In a short amount of time, the storm was upon them. The seas tossed and battered the trawler like a fairground ride. All but Greta were now profoundly seasick, holding any container they could find to catch the contents of their stomachs.

Despite the dangers, Greta foolishly decided that she needed to get away from the vomit odours and go on deck for a little fresh air. She was totally unprepared for the shock of the icy sea spray which mercilessly lashed her face. In seconds she was drenched and chilled to the bone. She glanced at the skipper on the bridge, fighting with the helm. He waved angrily at her to get back below deck, but she was stubborn and ignored him.

In hindsight, this action was completely irresponsible and would, *perhaps*, haunt her for many years to come.

Despite the insufferable cold and the impossible conditions, she managed to steady herself on the deck. Her futile intention was to see if she could see land. The trawler suddenly veered upwards, Greta instantly lost her balance and rapidly slid down the deck, all the way to the stern of the boat. She managed to grab hold of the railing – it was painfully cold and slippery wet. The motion of the trawler tossed her about like a rag doll. The Skipper observed all this from his dry and relatively comfortable bridge. After he had finished cursing and swearing, he exploded out of the cabin and inched his way to the stern. She was just about to lose grip on the ice-cold railing when Marius caught her arm. It was the exact spot of the super-glued bullet wound, but she was too numb with the cold to feel any pain. After a minute of struggling, he dragged her back on deck. Both were now exhausted and frozen. Greta would worry about her foolish actions later, but now, she had to drag herself to the stairwell. Marius was using all his strength to hold on, he was much heavier and older than Greta. The boat threw him around like a bucking bronco. He grabbed hold of anything that came to hand. He should have worn gloves, he should have worn a life jacket, but he had always known best. The ocean calmed for a second, giving him a chance to get back on his feet, but there was trickery in the seas. It was a pause before an almighty wave. He tried to hold on to a rope, then a capstan, then

some railings, but failed and was cruelly tossed like a pancake into the sea. Greta watched helplessly from the relative safety of the stairwell, there was nothing she could do. Nothing could save him. The icy seas would finish him in a couple of minutes, well before he could be fished out – not that Greta could or knew how to do that. She sat on the cold metal stairs for several minutes, shivering and crying, hoping that Marius would miraculously appear, climbing back on deck but obviously that wasn't going to happen.

The trawler was crossing one of the most hostile oceans in the world, enduring a humdinger of a storm with no one at the helm. How the hell, was she going to break it to them?

Eventually, she appeared below deck, shivering, dripping wet and sobbing. Sheridan always thought she was as hard as they come and had no tears ducts to speak of, but in a strange way, seeing her crying was reassuring. He quickly took her wet jacket off and wrapped the filthy duvet around her. Despite its grime and stale odour, it still had an excellent tog rating.

She had to tell them. It wasn't going to be easy.

'Marius is dead, he's overboard and it's my fault,' she sobbed.

She told them what had happened. No one blamed her and no one was in any hurry to go up on deck and look for him. It would have been a futile exercise anyway. Even though it was Mark who had gleaned the most insight into his character, he was more concerned about his Omega watch being lost at sea, than Marius.

Someone had to get to the bridge. Naturally, it would have to be Sheridan.

Greta wanted to go with him but he insisted she dried off and stayed warm. He had no intention of putting on a life jacket, if he did go overboard he preferred to drown quickly rather than freeze to death, relatively slowly. However, after further thought, he took a length of rope and tied one end around his waist.

Perhaps the storm was abating slightly, but the waves continued to toss the trawler like a rubber duck in a flushing toilet. The first thing Sheridan did was to tie the other end of the rope around a capstan. It was a case of one step forward, three steps back but impossibly, he made it to the bridge. He detached the rope and closed the door. His seasickness had miraculously disappeared. He felt invigorated and alive. This was undoubtedly living on the edge; perilous and exciting. He could die today, tomorrow or in 60 years' time, who knows? He was also in love, proper love, love like never before. Just seeing Greta made him melt inside, Greta made his inhibitions disappear, made

him confident, brave, mature and fearless. Carol never did this to him. He was so thankful that Carol was having an affair. He took hold of the helm and aimed the bow into the waves. The boat instantly became more manageable in the tall waves. It was now time to try and master the other controls and make sense of the gauges. Mostly, he found it pretty straightforward although the function of some knobs, switches and gauges were a complete mystery. He took note of the heading and aimed the bow roughly southwards – that was good. He looked at the fuel situation, half a tank. The propeller speed – 1,500 rpm, the engine temp – in the green. Everything was okay. He didn't fully understand the navigation system but he was more than satisfied with his newfound skills.

For an hour, Sheridan had been engrossed in being the new skipper, but Greta had waited long enough. The deck was now drying out and the seas less vigorous, however, she didn't want to make the same mistake again. She retracted the rope that Sheridan had used and tied it around her waist. Shortly, Greta reached the cabin without incident, she slid open the door and sulkily walked in. After a hug and a long kiss, everything was just perfect.

Eventually, the storm abated and the seas calmed. Blue skies appeared above them and then they saw the sun. It barely rose above the horizon but never-the-less it charged their souls and lit up the bridge and deck. Long shadows danced about with the movement of the trawler in the sea. Sheridan set the heading to south-south-east and then pulled Greta tightly into him.

Naturally, it was an inappropriate place to make love so they kissed some more and held each other tightly.

'What about your job?' Sheridan thought the time was right to ask.

'Have you any idea how mind-numbingly boring archaeology is?'

'No doubt, at the time, it served a purpose?' suggested Sheridan.

'Yes, it did. Why didn't you tell me you were Sherlock Holmes's son?'

'Why didn't you tell me you were an Olympic skier?'

Then they were inescapably drawn into each other's eyes and transported to another place – probably paradise. They held each other tightly and kissed passionately. She had only known Sheridan for just over two days but that was enough to unconditionally fall in love and know exactly who she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. Of course, she couldn't possibly say anything, that was Sheridan's domain.

'How are they?' asked Sheridan.

‘Well, at least the vomiting’s stopped. Probably sleeping it off now. That Everest is a strange chap. I think he may have some serious issues,’ said Greta.

‘I would imagine he has.’

Naturally, Sheridan had applied his technique and compiled a complete dossier on the chap, but now was not a suitable time to reveal his conclusions.

Now that the sea had calmed, Mark, Everest and Sherlock decided it was a good time to come up on deck and fill their lungs with crispy cold air. The return of the peacefulness of the ocean was suddenly interrupted by the unmistakable faint beat of helicopter rotors.

‘That’s odd, I’m sure that’s a Bel 412. Brave pilot all the way out here, the maximum range of that machine is 440 miles,’ said Everest in his squeaky voice.

Sheridan passed him a pair of binoculars from the bridge.

‘Yes, thought so, the 412, standard model. Pratt and Whitney tur…’

‘…Quick, point the boat north,’ shouted Sherlock.

Sheridan responded immediately, instinctively knowing why. The deep beat of the rotors and the whine of the engine became louder and louder. By the time the helicopter was circling overhead, the boat had turned about and appeared to be heading north – back towards the island. The backdraft from the rotors ruffled everyone’s hair except for Everest’s – he had none to speak of. They all waved until the helicopter had seen enough and was heading off in the direction it had come from.

‘Think they noticed?’ said Sheridan.

‘Hopefully not,’ said Sherlock.

‘Okay, okay, don’t keep it to yourselves, what’s going on?’ asked Mark angrily.

‘We’ve been sailing a whole day now, twelve hours, at an average speed of 22 knots. Taking the storm into account, we should be roughly halfway – 250 miles to Norway and 250 miles from Spitsbergen. They happen to be our two nearest land masses,’ said Sheridan patronisingly.

‘Yes, yes, I know that,’ said Mark.

‘As Everest kindly informed us, the maximum range of that helicopter is 440 miles. Work it out!’ said Sheridan abruptly.

Sheridan and Sherlock had realised the inconsistency in milliseconds, Mark took a little longer.

'So, we're not 250 miles from Spitsbergen then? quizzed Mark.

'If we are, that helicopter will run out of fuel, 60 miles before it gets back to the island. It seems as though we've been on a circular, albeit highly eventful trip,' said Sherlock.

'That's what he meant when he said the *Slott* brings him work now and then. He had my bloody Omega watch for the pleasure!' said Mark.

'Slott, so, that's what the locals call that place,' said Sheridan.

'I knew that,' said Greta brightly.

'Oh, by the way, found this in a locker on the bridge,' said Sheridan, casually.

He passed Mark a posh-looking watch. His face beamed like a four-year-old child.

'At least now I feel slightly less guilty knowing Marius was a double-crosser,' said Greta.

'Actually, I was warming to him,' said Mark as he proudly put *his* watch back on *his* wrist.

Sheridan returned the trawler to a southerly heading. One thing for certain, they were not, under any circumstances, returning to Spitsbergen. The downside of all this was that they had a lot more sailing in front of them than they thought they had – with possibly not enough diesel to do it. The upside was that the people from the 'Slott' thought that in a few hours, Marius would be faithfully returning his trawler with the absconders, to Longyearbyen port. However, by then, they would hopefully be well out of range of the helicopter and free from the clutches of Griselda's people.

Now that the trawler was technically theirs (through a vague sort of inheritance), they decided to make a concerted effort and clean it up as best they could. Boiling seawater with a little malt vinegar made an excellent liquid cleaner. The dirt and grime lifted off the duvet cover and bed sheet like magic. With a little elbow grease and salt as an abrasive, below deck cleaned up like a new pin. The washing dried surprisingly quickly, suspended above the hot engine. In no time at all, below deck transformed into a clean and welcoming living area. At least one person could now have a good night's sleep – or five people could snatch a couple of hours each.

Sheridan preferred to use his time studying the workings of the boat,

especially the navigation system. They needed to be heading in the right direction, specifically towards North Cape and on to the normality of Hammerfest.

It was now a good time for a proper father and son reunion. The sedative effects had finally cleared out of Sherlock Holmes's bloodstream and his powerful mind had returned to its previous state.

Sheridan chose to spend much of his time at the helm. Sherlock spied his chance and took a mug of tea up to him. Along with the warm beverage, he also had a folded photograph to show him.

'I always carry it by my side.'

'Hmm, a bit saucy. I presume this is my mother? She's beautiful,' said Sheridan earnestly.

'Yes, she was.'

'Who's she with, surely that's not you?'

'Wilhelm Gottsreich Sigismond von Ormstein; Grand Duke of Cassel-Felstein.'

'Bit of a mouthful!'

'Or King of Bohemia,' said Sherlock briskly.

'My mother's lover?'

'One of them,' said Sherlock.

'Oh, I see. So, when?' Sheridan tried to ask tactfully.

'I suppose you have a right to know. It was a few months after the case, 'A Scandal in Bohemia'. John, Doctor Watson, gave me a ticket for the Royal Opera House.'

'And Irene Adler was in the cast?' suggested Sheridan.

'Yes, yes, she was indeed. She had the voice of an angel and the grace of a butterfly. My heart raced. I had feelings I'd never had before. I went to her dressing room afterwards,' explained Sherlock.

'And the rest is history, as they say!'

'Yes, I suppose it was. You, the love child of *the* Sherlock Holmes and Irene Adler. Me of all people, having a love affair,' confessed Sherlock.

'Affair?' questioned Sheridan.

'She was married at the time. I happened to go to her very munificent wedding,' Sherlock added.

'Right, so how…?'

‘How did I know you were mine? …She sent me a letter. Would you like to read it?’

‘You have it with you?’

From the same pocket where the photograph was kept, Sherlock produced a small vanilla-coloured envelope. Sheridan opened it and took out a single sheet of cream paper with beautiful neat handwriting on one side. After all the years, a sweet fragrance still wafted delicately into Sheridan’s nostrils.

My dearest darling Sherlock,

I have some news, news for you and you alone my Love.

Our passionate moments, our wonderful moments together

have brought fruit, yours and mine, no one else’s.

Sadly, my husband is lacking in all your areas of abundance.

A cherub within is of yours and my making.

But, my love, I lead a life of deception, a life of intemperance.

You have defeated me but now I have no choice but to defeat you.

Please forgive me.

I must keep this, our secret, until I perish.

Again, please forgive me my dearest.

All my love

Irene xx

‘Well, that certainly says it all. Technically speaking, then, I have another father. My mother’s husband?’ suggested Sheridan.

‘A Lawyer called Godfrey Norton, despicable on all accounts. Your mother died seven months after writing this letter but he never showed any signs of remorse. As you probably gather, he promptly disowned you and put you up for adoption. Believe me, that was a good thing.’

‘Apparently, you didn’t want me either,’ said Sheridan poignantly.

‘I make no apologies. It was important that you had good parents to provide you with a normal happy upbringing… I was not suited to those ends. That didn’t mean to say I didn’t keep close ties with you and watch over you. I knew it would be you who would follow my

clues and come after us. It certainly wouldn't be my brother!'

Clues? You're referring to the Morse code – S and H?'

'That and the earplug, the ice cream wrapper behind the radiator and of course, the piece torn from a calendar – February 29th, I put in the toilet cistern,' said Sherlock.

'February 29th? Oh, I see, perhaps a little too cryptic! Leap year – long year – Longyearbyen. No, missed that and the ice cream wrapper,' said Sheridan dismissively.

'You do realise that you're half American? Irene was American. I believe San Francisco was her birthplace. Perhaps you should visit there one day?' suggested Sherlock.

'Perhaps I will.'

Chapter 20
A drag queen

An unforgettable view of the quintessential Norwegian fjords suddenly broke through the sea mist. It was a comforting sight, especially for Greta, who incidentally was Norwegian. The fuel gauge was on empty. It had been on empty and teasing them for hours, but as the engine continued to plod on, the concern had somewhat subsided.

Hammerfest happened to be tucked away several miles inland from the meandering coastline. This was fortunate for Hammerfest and its inhabitants, sheltering from sea storms and icy winds, but unfortunate for the team of five. Finally, the fuel gauge told the truth. The diesel engine coughed a couple of times and then, seconds later, stopped. They were in throwing distance from the rugged coast but they were dead in the water and no one was going to swim for it, that was a certainty. In the depths of the hold, Mark discovered a dinghy with a small outboard motor attached. As expected, it was deflated, but on the bright side, he found a foot pump to inflate it. Several minutes and numerous pumps later, there was no visible change. Greta found the problem: a two-inch gash in the fabric.

'Oh well, so much for that,' said Mark dispirited.

'We have the means,' cheered Sheridan.

It was another job for his small tube of superglue. Minutes later, Sheridan had sliced off a superfluous flap of canvass and glued it onto the hole. Mark was unconvinced so he tugged the canvass. It had well and truly stuck. Sometime later, the dinghy was taught and fully inflated. To everyone's surprise, the outboard motor had a full tank of fuel. Mark and Sheridan grasped a rope each and lowered the dinghy into the water. That was the easy bit, now everyone had to climb aboard. Fortunately, the sea was calm but despite this, the ageing process had caught up with Sherlock. The demanding descent down the rope ladder inevitably took its toll on him. Everest was slightly more agile. Mark did his best to make it look easy but fooled no one. It was debatable if Greta actually needed the ladder at all. Lastly, Sheridan lowered himself clumsily down into the dinghy. The basic engine had a simple rope-pull-start and several pulls later had not produced so much as a backfire. Everest intervened - he pressed a small rubber button several times to prime the engine and with one

tug of the rope, the engine burst into life. They all cheered.

The former grimy, rugged and unrefined trawler had been their home for nearly three days. In its defence, it had kept afloat during the storm, kept them warm, dry and successfully crossed a dangerous ocean. It also has to be said that before running out of fuel, the diesel engine hadn't missed a beat. They had all grown quite attached to the red and black trawler and watched with mixed affection as it distanced itself from them. It was immediately apparent that the dinghy had none of the trawler's virtues but it was the only option of getting them to land.

Remarkably, forty minutes later, the bright lights of Hammerfest town came into view. Normality, civilisation and an international airport were almost within reach.

To their complete surprise, a Norwegian Police boat approached them at high speeds. Blue lights and an intermittent siren suggested that it was not altogether a friendly welcoming. A couple of gunshots in the air confirmed it.

'Return immediately to the harbour!' screeched a voice from the loudhailer.

The *return* bit confused even the two sleuths. They were heading towards the harbour anyway, so they sort of complied.

No sooner had they moored, than they found themselves escorted at gunpoint into a black police van.

'Can't anyone make us welcome?' sighed Mark.

'I have to admit it is getting a little tedious,' said Sheridan.

'All part and parcel of the profession,' said Sherlock.

'Actually, I find it quite exciting,' said Greta.

One by one they were interrogated by the Norwegian police. Greta was first which was good because she was Norwegian, spoke Norwegian and happened to be very attractive. Then the others were questioned in English. This was not so good and a lot was inevitably lost in translation. None of them had particularly much to say other than that they had escaped the clutches of an illegal cryonic facility in Spitsbergen, crossed a hostile ocean on a fishing trawler and had washed a filthy duvet cover with hot seawater.

Sherlock was the last to be interrogated and said much of what the others had said, but in addition, deduced that the wife of one of the

interrogating police was having an affair with a tall Swedish plumber and the other policeman spent his weekends in a drag queen tribute band. As he was absolutely correct on all counts, they couldn't be unduly angry with him. Besides, duffing up an old man was simply not allowed. One of the policemen began staring at Sherlock and then the other followed suit. One of them went out of the room and after a short while returned with two baseball caps with 'Politi' written prominently on them. He placed both of them on Sherlock's head with one peak at the back and the other peak at the front. They then continued to stare. The other policeman went out of the room for a couple of minutes and returned with a pipe.

'Please, humour us,' said one of the policemen.

Sherlock put it in his mouth. The policemen both smiled at each other.

'You're Sherlock Holmes, aren't you? The consulting detective?' suggested one of the policemen.

'You've come to solve our three murders?' asked the other policeman.

'I have? Well, er, I'll do my best,' said Sherlock.

Due to this fortuitous discovery, they brought the other four into the interrogation room.

'Are you… Watson?' they asked Everest Pritchard. He *looked* approximately the right age, but that's where the similarity ended.

'No, I am! I'm Mark Watson. Doctor John Watson's son,' snapped Mark.

'And, don't tell us, you're Sherlock Holmes's Son?' they asked Sheridan, openly smirking.

'Yes, Sheridan Banner… Holmes,' said Sheridan.

Both policemen laughed out loud.

'What's so funny?' asked Sheridan.

'You can't fool us, come on, everyone knows that Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson are… how do you say in English?'

'Partners by any chance?' suggested Sheridan.

'Look, my father was not gay! Sherlock Holmes is not gay!' fumed Mark.

Both the policemen nodded their heads in agreement.

'If you say so,' said one of the policemen.

'Look, my mother was Irene Adler. This man, Sherlock Holmes, is my

father, okay!' said Sheridan sternly.

'Leave it, Son. It doesn't matter if I am gay or straight. You are my son, that's all that matters,' said Sherlock.

A few heated words followed on from this banter which forced Sherlock to casually mention again about one of the policemen being a part-time drag queen. Sheridan had also deduced this fact during his interrogation but had tactfully kept it to himself. Now he was beginning to wonder why he had been so prudent. Needless to say, it took a while for the air to clear before Sherlock asked an overdue question,

'You have some unsolved murders then?'

Chapter 21
Hammerfest

…A modest town sited in a sheltered bay on the western side of a small Norwegian island approximately 17 miles tall by 10 miles wide.

Normally it was a peaceful and uneventful place to live. Being murdered, raped, assaulted or robbed were rare events indeed, so, for three young women to be brutally murdered in the space of a week was unprecedented. Because it happened to be an island with only one bridge connecting it to the mainland, it was an easy matter to quickly lock down the island and prevent anyone from sneaking away. This is exactly what the police had done, much to the consternation of the locals who now feared that they were essentially confined in a cage with a wild animal.

Because of the very intimate and enclosed community, countless common factors linked the three murdered women. They frequented the same supermarket, the same hairdressers, walked the same routes, filled up at the same fuel station and so on. As a result, there were no precise facts or clues to go on, which meant no suspects. The police had drawn a blank – they needed help. How convenient that the world-famous consulting detective just happened to be visiting (or leaving) the island.

At first glance, it appeared to be one of the most challenging cases Sherlock had ever taken on. In that respect, it was a blessing that he had his son to help him. It would prove to be the first joint venture of the Holmeses – son and father.

The police made it clear that no one could leave the island until the crime had been solved. It could well be Sherlock's, Sheridan's, Mark's, Greta's and Everest's new home for a very long time.

No one could ever accuse the Norwegian police of being unreasonable. They insisted that the sleuths had adequate rest and a good night's sleep before they began their renowned methods of investigations.

Mark pawned his reclaimed Omega watch and used some of the money to pay for a hotel. Certainly not the best on the island, but boasted three stars and was much more comfortable than the trawler.

The next morning, they all had a welcome surprise: the sun popped its head above the horizon. It was bathed in a complex orange sky but

gave off very little warmth. All five decided to go for a walk and explore the town together. Sheridan and Greta desperately wanted to be on their own but there was little chance of that. Everest was somewhat of an outsider, but he happily tagged on behind, cracking the occasional insensitive joke and spouting out trivia about the history of the island.

With time at a premium, it wasn't long before a police van pulled up alongside them. All five piled in. It was going to be a crowded investigation.

Chapter 22
Three murders

The first journey in the cramped police van took them to the east side of town. A whitewashed timber-framed house overlooking a picturesque was where the first of the victims lived. Her name was Holga Breetang, thirty-two years old, not married and lived with her mother. She worked in the local council offices and by all accounts was content with her uncluttered lifestyle. She had a dog called Pepper and regularly took her for a walk around the lake and along the hillside.

It was on the hillside path where the dreadful crime took place.

Behind a cluster of large rocks, Holga was discovered. She had been violently raped and received a fatal wound to her head. A bloodstained rock was found at the scene. Pepper the dog, made her own way home, alerting Holga's mother that something was wrong.

Naturally, her mother was distraught. The last thing she wanted was five strangers and a policeman, rummaging around in her house. Only Everest asked any questions and they were mostly irrelevant and creepy: Did she take any doggy bags with her? What did she have for breakfast? Did she like bald men… and was she a bit of a looker? As it transpires, *that* question was quite relevant.

After a thorough search of the house, all five squeezed back into the van.

'Do you have any photographs of the crime scene?' asked Sheridan.

The policeman, named inspector Traske, selected a series of photos on his smartphone and passed it to Sheridan. He shared the screen with Sherlock, Mark and Greta, doing their best to push Everest out of the circle. Ten pictures displayed the scene. It was truly gruesome. She lay in the centre of a stony path with much of her body naked and covered in blood. Her coat had been removed and cast to one side. Her blouse had been ripped apart and her trousers and underwear had been pulled down to her ankles.

Sherlock and Sheridan looked at each other and shook their heads in dismay for another reason.

'Didn't you take any pictures before the crime scene was disturbed?'

asked Sherlock.

‘The crime scene wasn’t disturbed!’ insisted Traske.

‘The blood covered stone – the instrument of murder, has clearly been handled. The blood runs on the rock should obviously be vertical, they’re not, they’re at an angle,’ pointed out Sheridan.

‘Surely fingerprints and DNA should be all over the place, especially as she’s been raped?’ suggested Greta.

‘You’re right, there is, but it’s not straightforward. Up to now, forensics have identified over twenty different fingerprints and countless DNA profiles on the stone and parts of her body,’ said inspector Traske.

‘I presume this fact is common with the other two victims,’ suggested Sherlock.

‘Yes, correct,’ said Traske.

‘What are you implying? Several people are involved with each murder?’ puzzled Mark.

‘On the contrary. No, the murderer is very clever, very clever indeed,’ said Sheridan.

‘Or it could be like ‘*Murder on the Orient Express’*,’ added Everest.

For the next victim, they headed to the north of the town. The route followed the scenic coastal road. As they passed the harbour, they caught sight of Marius’s trawler being tugged towards the quayside. It looked much smaller than they recalled – far too small to have kept them safe, dry and warm whilst crossing a hostile ocean. Mark, Sheridan, Greta, Sherlock and Everest all wondered to themselves, who officially owned the trawler now.

The second victim’s house was completely red, not particularly pleasing to the eye – the colour of a ripe tomato. The six-strong party piled clumsily into the small overly furnished living room. All, apart from Everest, were fully aware that they were unwelcome and intrusive at this sad time. He seemed to not understand the concept of discretion. Dasha Smerkle, aged twenty-eight, left behind a husband and an eight-year-old daughter. The daughter was being looked after elsewhere by her grandparents, but the husband was there to tolerate the invasion. Once again, the sleuths searched throughout the house for clues. Even the small garden didn’t escape Sherlock's magnifying glass. The husband was distraught but Everest wasn’t convinced. He thought it was all an act and didn’t hold back in his views. In unison,

everyone told him to shut up and go away but not quite as polite as that. It had been building up for a long time. After a while, they all climbed back into the van.

‘Where did you find Dasha,’ asked Greta.

‘Pulled her out of the harbour. She was completely naked. She’d been raped and then most likely pushed into the water,’ said Traske.

‘How awful,’ said Greta.

‘Any photographs,’ asked Sheridan.

Once again, Traske produced his smartphone on which he had stored all the relevant pictures of the murder cases.

‘She was naked and a pale shade of grey when we fished her out. She had suffered severe bruising around her neck.’

‘Did you find her clothes?’ asked Sherlock.

‘Yes, piled up on the quayside,’

‘Fingerprints and DNA?’ asked Mark.

‘No fingerprints found, but there were several DNA profiles on her clothes,’ said Traske.

‘And internally?’ asked Everest squeakily. Someone had to ask the question.

‘Yes, the same,’ said Traske quietly.

‘Do you have a photograph of the pile of clothes?’ asked Sherlock.

‘No, didn’t think that was relevant.’

‘This is ridiculous! No wonder you’re not getting anywhere with your investigations. Of course, it was relevant!’ snapped Sheridan angrily.

‘Probably would have been the most important clue so far,’ added Sherlock.

On the way to the final victim, they were taken on a small tour of the town, passing the shops, a pretty timber-framed church, a well-cared-for park and the police station. People went about their business as usual, but it was clear that there was an uneasiness plaguing the town. Three gruesome unsolved murders in this normally peaceful, crime-free place, were very disturbing. It was enough to make everyone, not just the women, permanently on edge, habitually glancing over their shoulders.

The third victim, Helena Versashi, aged 27, was perhaps the most disconcerting case of all. She lived on her own in a flat above a fishing

tackle shop, just on the edge of town. There was nothing unusual about that except for the fact that Helena was a police officer. She was highly experienced in her profession and normally could tackle any assailant to their peril. However, despite being a self-defence expert, she had been murdered in her own flat – apparently without a struggle.

This time it was different, they were heading to the scene of the crime. Traske had the key to her flat. He trembled as he put the key in the lock and turned it. Clearly, his ability to remain emotionally detached was visibly failing as he struggled with the simplest of door locks. The entrance opened onto a modest lounge area. It was evidently a compact accommodation. Apart from one wall of the room spattered with blood, everywhere else was reasonably clean and tidy with everything in its proper place. From the abundance of silver-grey dust paint on most hard surfaces, forensics had clearly gone to town on this occasion. Naturally, the body had been removed. Traske was noticeably uncomfortable being in the room. He and Helena were obviously good friends, perhaps more. Everest really needed to watch his tongue, but he didn't.

'Well, I know who my money's on, the one who found her dead body,' said Everest.

'I found the body. Helena and I… We were…'

Trask could say no more. Greta thought it appropriate to touch his shoulder affectionately.

Sheridan scanned the room like some kind of alien machine. Sherlock had a different technique; a more old-fashioned approach with his trusty magnifying glass. No doubt, their deductions would be more-or-less the same.

'Forensics has the murder weapon – a kitchen knife?' suggested Sheridan.

'Yes, how did you know?'

'The spray of blood across the wall is consistent with the victim being stabbed in the neck while she was asleep on the sofa,' said Sheridan.

'Certainly a cowardly murder,' added Sherlock as he examined a framed photograph on the sideboard. He deduced that it was of the victim, with several other police officers at her side. 'Has this been disturbed?'

'No, not that I'm aware of,' insisted Traske.

'How did the killer get in?' asked Mark.

‘There’s only one entrance – the way we came in, but there’s no sign of the door being forced,’ said Traske.

‘We could do with a quick look in the other rooms,’ said Sheridan.

‘What for? This room is the crime scene!’ Traske protested.

Sheridan said nothing, just gave him a frowning stare.

‘Alright, but be as brief as you can.’

‘Okay, just my father and I,’ said Sheridan.

Naturally, this didn’t go down well with the others.

‘Female eyes may offer a different perspective on things,’ insisted Greta.

‘Okay, and you,’ said Sheridan.

‘I thought I was your partner?’ complained Mark.

‘Okay, and you too,’ said Sheridan.

‘Yes, I’d like a look around,’ said Everest.

‘No!’ said everyone else in unison.

A few minutes later they all returned to the lounge to observe Traske in the act of gently and caringly folding Helena’s scarf and draping it over the blood-stained sofa.

‘Where’s Everest?’ asked Sheridan.

‘He’s gone into the kitchen to get me a glass of water.’

‘Is there anything else that may be relevant to the murders?’ asked Sherlock.

‘No nothing, we’ve drawn a blank. Something you ought to know, that window was wide open when I got here,’ said Traske, pointing to the large lounge window.

Immediately, Sherlock began examining the window frame with his magnifying glass.

‘I don’t think this was the killer’s escape route, it’s quite a drop to the ground. It’s more likely that he used the main entrance,’ said Sherlock.

‘Perhaps he was disturbed and had to leave hurriedly. Was Helena raped like the others?’ asked Sheridan.

Traske took a while but eventually replied, ‘Yes she was… Where the bloody hell is that water!’

‘That man is insufferable, I’ll go see,’ said Sheridan.

Sheridan entered the kitchen to find Everest rummaging in a wall cupboard.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Sheridan whispered angrily.

‘Thought I might find some biscuits. I’m starving, had nothing since breakfast,’ said Everest.

‘Just get the glass of water, for god’s sake!’

Back in the discomfort of the cramped van, they pooled their observations and opinions before setting off.

‘Am I right in assuming that all three were raped *after* they had been murdered,’ suggested Sherlock.

‘Yes, forensics seem to confirm that,’ said the inspector.

‘Well, if you ask me, I think all the victims knew the killer,’ said Mark.

‘Okay, I’m asking you, what brings you to that remarkable conclusion?’ asked Sherlock.

‘Well, clearly the killer seemed to know all the victim’s habits. Somehow, he knew Helena would be asleep on the sofa after a busy day’s shift. He knew when and where Holga took her dog for a walk. And he knew Dasha would be down at the harbour away from her family, late at night. She may have been having an affair with the killer and went out to meet him?’ suggested Mark.

‘My dear Watson,’ said Sheridan.

‘That’s my line!’ snapped Sherlock.

‘I’ve adopted it! You could well be right my friend, but there are one or two things I noticed in Helena’s house.’

‘Like what for instance?’ asked Traske.

‘I said she was stabbed whilst she was asleep on the sofa. Nobody asked me how I happened to know Helena was asleep.’

‘Obviously, she was asleep or she would have tried to confront the killer,’ said Mark.

‘Not necessarily. Once again, I suspect someone…’ Sheridan purposely glanced at Traske, ‘has disturbed the crime scene. Inspector, did you use the television remote to turn off the television?’

Traske refrained from answering for a few moments.

‘Okay, okay, yes, it was on when I discovered the body. I turned it off, it was loud and distracting.’

‘As I suspected, the television was on whilst the killer was in the flat. Also, a wine glass had been moved from the coffee table and taken into the kitchen,’ continued Sheridan.

‘Yes, yes, that was me too. It was one of a pair I bought her for her birthday. It was expensive fine crystal. I didn’t want it damaged by the forensic team,’ said Traske.

‘This is quite unacceptable. How are we supposed to solve these crimes if there is no professionalism? I also noticed the photo frame I was looking at, had been moved. It didn’t line up with the thin layer of dust beneath,’ added Sherlock.

‘Interesting, anyway, an important matter, when I went to fetch Everest, I examined the wine glass you took into the kitchen earlier. Did your team notice that there was a powdery deposit at the bottom of the glass? I’ll put money on it that it’s some kind of knockout drug,’ said Sheridan.

‘I’ll get it checked,’ said Inspector Traske, humbly shrugging his shoulders.

‘Alright, but the killer must have known that she would be having a glass of wine at that time of day.’ stated Mark.

‘True, anyway, moving on to Holga. If anyone noticed, it said, *Pass pa hunden*, on the gate – I assume beware of the dog? Holga may not have known the killer, he only had to look at the gate to know she’d be taking it for a walk at some time!’ said Sheridan.

‘I suppose now you’re going to tell me why Dasha was down at the harbour?’ jeered Mark.

‘Good point, why was Dasha down at the harbour?’ Sheridan asked Traske.

‘According to her husband, she’d popped down to the supermarket on foot, to get a few food items,’ said Traske.

‘Was she on her way there, or back, and if she was on her way back, where was her shopping?’ asked Sherlock.

This was obviously something the police hadn’t thought about.

‘Er, I’ll get the frogmen in,’ said Traske, despairing with his obvious failings.

A brief moment passed before Sheridan had a request.

‘Do you think I could have the keys? I just need to pop back and re-check something in Helena’s flat. I won’t be a minute.’

It had been an interesting day. Not exactly pleasant but altogether better than being locked in a police cell or heavily sedated in a cryonics facility.

They all met up that evening in the Town's most popular pub. They didn't particularly want Everest's company, but none of them had the heart or conviction to tell him not to come. It turned out that he was particularly partial to the warm brown liquid, not that he offered to pay for a single round. The upside of this was that after his fourth pint, he collapsed into a drunken stupor.

'So, what are the facts?' asked Greta, smiling with misplaced excitement.

'You're loving this, aren't you?' suggested Sheridan, returning the smile.

'Well, no but…'

'You may as well do. This is what I remember as a child. The excitement of the case to the exclusion of everything else. I learnt to amuse myself from a very early age,' said Mark sourly.

'Well, all three were murdered before they were raped and all three were covered in DNA profiles and fingerprints,' said Sherlock.

'To hide the identity of the killer?' suggested Greta.

'All were pretty young ladies of a similar age and all living within a couple of miles from each other,' summarised Sheridan.

'Well, I can see something in common,' said Mark. 'Wine with Helena. Dog food with Holga's dog and shopping with Dasha,' chirped Mark.

'So?' puzzled Sherlock.

'Come on Uncle, do I have to spell it out?' said Mark eagerly. 'The local supermarket! I'll lay odds it's some weirdo who works there.'

This was the first time Mark had called Sherlock, uncle, in Sheridan's company. Of course, he wasn't a proper uncle, but right from an early age, that was a title of convenience. Everyone nodded at Mark's theory. Naturally, Sherlock and Sheridan knew he was way off the mark but they decided to humour him. It was something to do while their immense brainpower was processing the data they had subconsciously absorbed.

The next morning all five piled into the police van which had been waiting outside the hotel for a good thirty minutes. Everest was quiet and he wished everyone else would be quiet too, but purposely, they weren't.

‘Mark has a theory that it may be someone who works at the local supermarket,’ said Sheridan.

‘Hmm, supermarket. A possibility, I suppose?’ pondered Inspector Traske.

Chapter 23
Shoplifting

Eight men worked at the town's main supermarket. Three of the men were of senior age and had difficulty in standing let alone committing murder and rape. One by one, the other five were preliminarily interviewed in the back room of the supermarket. The first three had perfect alibis, the fourth made a run for it, so they interviewed the fifth. He also had a good alibi.

Hugo Brun was apprehended, a short time later, in the centre of town and taken directly to the police station. Inspector Traske and inspector Regningen conducted the interview. This time the team were not invited. The police decided that they should steal some if not all of the credit.

'Why did you run?' asked Traske.

He didn't answer.

'Come on, you may as well come clean and confess,' said Regningen.

'I need to speak to my solicitor,' said Brun.

'Come on Hugo, a solicitor isn't going to help you. If you confess you may get away with as little as twenty years,' said Traske.

'What, for nicking a few bottles of spirits?'

'Where were you on the evenings of Thursday the 9th, Wednesday the 15th and Saturday the 18th?' asked Regningen.

'Every Wednesday and Saturday I'm at the gym and then I go down to the club with my mates. Thursday's I'm shelf filling all evening. Look what's all this about?' asked Brun.

'Can anyone vouch for you?'

'Yes, several people and I'll be on the security cameras.'

The interview was suddenly interrupted by Traske's phone ringing.

'Yes, can't it wait!? I'm in the middle of an interview. Go on… yes… yes… all three, you're certain? Have they double-checked? Okay, get Holmes and his tribe in.'

Traske now had to make an important decision regarding Hugo Brun.

It came almost immediately.

‘Okay, you’re free to go.’

Chapter 24
A visit to the Morgue

Mark Watson and Sherlock Holmes spent an irritating couple of hours shopping with self-elected guide, Everest. Shopping for certain items was severely overdue. All three desperately needed to stock up on toiletries and fresh underwear. They suspected people were beginning to give them a wide berth. By the end of the morning, they were frozen to the bone. They were also ready to throttle Everest. He really was a tedious, boring, dull, dreary, monotonous, tiresome person.

Sheridan and Greta had remained behind to catch up on a couple of things. Firstly, they both needed to make a phone call. Despite Sheridan's former misgivings about Polly having a mobile phone, he had to admit that it was now a godsend. He could speak to his children directly without having to have his calls vetted by Carol. Predictably, they were both missing their Dad. Another tear developed in one of Sheridan's eyes.

Greta called her mother, but despite her recent adventures including near-death experiences, love affair, perilous ocean crossing and current murder investigation, she didn't manage to get a word in edgeways. After the phone calls, they moved on to other more predictable things.

A policeman banging on the hotel room door was not the best way to curtail their intimate moments. Hastily they did their buttons and zips up and minutes later were being whisked over to the police station.

Once again, the five convened. Sheridan and Greta both looked as though they'd been dragged through a hedge backwards, but she glowed and he beamed. Even Everest accurately deduced that they were in love with each other, but for once, he kept it to himself.

'We have some new information,' said Traske.

'Don't tell me, it wasn't anyone at the supermarket?' predicted Sheridan.

'Apparently not. However, there has been an interesting development. It may be nothing at all, or it may be something important,'

'Yes, don't keep us in suspense,' urged Greta as she looked down her nose to do a button up on her blouse.

‘Forensic have the results of the DNA and fingerprint tests. As I said before, there were many unidentified DNA profiles and fingerprints on all three corpses but it turns out that all the DNA profiles were female. Not only that, they found Dasha’s and Holga’s DNA on Helena,’ said Traske.

‘Strange, no males,’ said Mark.

‘I think this is where my father’s famous quote comes into play. Over to you, Dad.’

‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth,’ said Sherlock expressively.

‘We need to see the bodies,’ said Sheridan positively.

The morgue was on the other side of town. Everest was the only one looking forward to the experience. Greta decided not to go in, staying in the police van. The others filed into a cold soulless room with one wall covered with large grey cabinets. The mortician looked at his information sheet and pulled out three long drawers. There was a greyish-white corpse in each. Sheridan had never seen a single dead body before, but now, three were displayed prominently before him. The reality of death was before him. Cold, motionless and slightly odorous. For Sherlock, it was a fairly common sight but never welcomed. He reached into his pocket for his magnifying glass. Sheridan didn’t need ocular assistance, he had perfect vision, he just needed a stronger stomach. The first corpse had a severely bruised neck and was clearly greyer than the others. The next corpse was considerably more gruesome. No bloodstains, they had been cleaned up, but a patch of hair had been removed to reveal a large open delve in the skull with bone and brain on show. The final corpse, with no blood again, looked at first sight, unharmed but on closer inspection, a one-inch slit in her neck was visible.

Goriness aside, all three had been very attractive women. All had long flowing hair and shapely figures. Everest drooled slightly at the colourless nakedness. He clearly was a disturbed man.

‘I’ve seen enough!’ said Sheridan abruptly.

‘Me too!’ concurred Sherlock.

Chapter 25
The evidence

Sheridan was bothered – inwardly tormented. The pressure was on. He had seen something, an anomaly, and it was sounding alarm bells within. The problem was that his subconscious refused to tell him what it was. The greater the urgency for the crime to be solved, the tighter the inner workings of his mind clung on to the anomaly.

The citizens of Hammerfest were desperate for the murderer to be caught for two important reasons: Firstly, everyone was terrified of being the next victim. Secondly, sealing off the island from the rest of the world meant people couldn't leave. This was very inconvenient because many people worked or had families living off the island. Equally inconvenient, there was a cruise ship in the harbour with five hundred tourists on board. They couldn't leave either and predictably, many were getting seriously frustrated.

'Now please don't take this the wrong way. As much as I love your company…'

'Yes, spit it out?' said Greta curtly.

'I need time to think,' said Sheridan.

'Well think then, I'm not stopping you!'

'I need to think… on my own,' he said delicately.

'Well, why didn't you say so, I was thinking about going and getting my hair done, it's a right mess,' said Greta, handling rejection gracefully.

Sheridan should have learnt by now to give a tactful reply when women self-deprecate themselves such as 'It looks fine to me' but his excuse was that he was hopelessly wrapped up in the frustration of elusive thought.

Minutes later, Greta had her coat, hat, gloves and shoes on. She gave Sheridan a quick kiss on the lips and then made her way to the door.

'Be good, see you later, love you,' said Greta.

'Yeah, see you later, love you too.'

Sheridan was too inwardly engrossed to give her the expected send off

or even look in her direction. Fortunately, Greta was forgiving and understanding. These were two of her best qualities. She smiled at him and left quietly.

It was no use, Sheridan's thoughts were completely log-jammed. This aside, he had an important errand to do. Perhaps a walk down to the harbour and back would clear his blockage.

Several hours later, at 4:30 in the afternoon, to be precise, there was a bang on the hotel room door. Sheridan snapped out of his stupor and opened the door. It was Mark.

'Hi partner, had a good day?'

'So, so…'

'Anything come to mind?' asked Mark.

'No, nothing. I've gone over and over everything. Yes, there are blatant clues, but they're the type that requires long-winded police investigation – things we can't do. But, there *is* something, something I have seen or heard or smelt that's nagging within and it won't come to the surface,' said Sheridan.

'Perhaps a pint down at the local will sort you out… Where's Greta?' asked Mark curiously.

'Gone to have her hair done.'

'What time is she due back?'

'Didn't say, left this morning – giving me some space.'

'Well, it doesn't take all day to have her hair done. Give her a ring, she can join us at the pub.'

Sheridan rang her mobile but there was no reply, 'that's strange.'

'She's probably had the works: hair, eyebrows, leg wax, manicure. She has to look her best now she's got a new man in her life,' said Mark enviously.

'Probably so,' said Sheridan still deep in thought.

'Life's not fair, you get Greta and I get Everest, you don't fancy a swap by any chance?'

'Haven't you figured it out with Everest yet?' said Sheridan.

'Figured out what? That he's an obnoxious chauvinistic weirdo?' suggested Mark.

'Oh, he's probably a lot worse than that.'

Then suddenly it happened, what he had waited for, strained and

searched for all day. But it wasn't good, it wasn't a relief, a cold sweat engulfed his entire body.

'Repeat what you just said.'

'What? I get Everest you get Greta?'

'No before that – the works.'

'Oh, hair, eyebrows, leg wax, manicure?'

'That's it! That's what I subconsciously observed in the mortuary. They were all very well presented women.'

'Brilliant! Is that it? That's all your immense brain has come up with? I could have told you that!' And most likely that's the reason why they were attacked!' snapped Mark.

'No, no, you're missing the point. They were attractive, but more so, they took pride in their appearance.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' Mark continued to snap.

'You may have noticed that they all had nicely styled hair, their legs were waxed and eyebrows trimmed but something you probably didn't notice, their perfectly manicured nails. All the victims had identically shaped fingernails,' explained Sheridan.

'Identically shaped fingernails? Definitely something only you would have noticed. So, what you're saying is, they had to be done by the same person… I'll get Traske,' said Mark with urgency.

Immediately, Sheridan thought the worst. Greta had been missing for almost six hours and he knew it wouldn't have taken that long to have every treatment going. She wasn't answering her mobile. He tried again, but still no answer. She had gone specifically to have her hair done, but what if she had been persuaded to have other things done like having her fingernails manicured too?

Traske arrived shortly at the hotel. Sheridan filled him in with his worrying revelation. He knew it was beyond a theory, everything now fitted perfectly together. To confirm Sheridan's suspicions, Traske immediately sent a couple of his officers to the morgue.

If she happened to have gone to the same beauty parlour or hairdresser with this particular manicurist, it didn't bear thinking about. Sheridan tried not to think along those lines, but inevitably he did.

'Did she say which hairdressers she was going to?' asked Traske.

'No, perhaps it was one she saw when we went out exploring

yesterday?'

Minutes later, Sheridan, Mark and Traske were retracing their previous day's footsteps, but this time in a police car. They hadn't been going long before a message came through on the radio. The officers confirmed that all three victims did have identically shaped fingernails, despite one of them being in seawater for several hours. Their fingernails were so precisely cut and filed that, almost certainly they had been done very recently by the same person.

The first hairdressers or beauty parlour they passed was called some long Norwegian name and looked very exclusive. The car screeched to a halt outside and Sheridan darted inside. Fortunately, everyone spoke fluent English.

'Has a young lady, so high, shoulder-length blonde hair, named Greta, been here today?' asked Sheridan agitatedly.

'Did she make an appointment?' asked the receptionist.

'Wouldn't have thought so.'

'Need to book at least a week in advance. It's the same for most hairdressers in the town,' chanted the receptionist.

'She must have got in somewhere?' pleaded Sheridan.

A young girl on the other side of the room, tending to someone's hair, overheard the conversation.

'Blonde hair, yellow jacket and hat?' said the girl shrilly.

'Yes, yes!'

'She called in this morning. I couldn't fit her in but told her that she might get in at *Debonair's*. They sometimes have spaces,' said the girl.

'Where's that?' said Sheridan eagerly.

'Top of the street, turn left and then first left down an alleyway,' said the receptionist.

Sheridan thanked her and darted back into the police car. *Debonair's* sounded cheesy and *Alleyway* sounded back street. With a loud squealing of tyres, the car raced up the street, left and left again. This time all three jumped out of the car and piled into the hairdressers.

'Has a young lady, blonde, yellow jacket been here today?' asked Sheridan in a panic.

'Greta?' asked the receptionist.

'Yes, yes, when did she leave?' ranted Sheridan.

‘Well… let me see,’ said the receptionist referring to her diary. ‘She had her hair styled, legs waxed, eyebrows shaped, and the full manicure package. She paid 950 kroner on her card at and left at… a quarter past two.’

‘Yes, yes, thanks. That’s two hours ago. Who did her nails?’ asked Sheridan.

‘Andre.’

‘Is Andre here?’ asked Mark.

‘No, he’s gone home, wasn’t feeling too well.’

‘Where does he… do his work?’ asked Sheridan, clearly troubled.

‘Over there in the corner,’ said the receptionist, pointing to a desk with a chair on either side of it. Sheridan crossed the room and examined the various contents of the table. Everything you’d expect was there plus two large desk cooling fans.

‘When did Andre leave?’ asked Sheridan.

‘Funnily enough, he went just after Greta left.’

This was too much of a coincidence and Sheridan knew it. In all probability, they now knew who the killer was. This was good, but they now knew who his next target was and that was bad.

‘Quickly, we need a photo or description of this Andre!’ demanded Traske.

‘Why, is he in trouble?’ asked the receptionist.

‘It’s more than likely that Andre is the Hammerfest murderer,’ said Mark.

The receptionist turned instantly pale, paler than she already was. She gave them a detailed description of him and then his address while weeping, screaming and finally fainting.

Traske immediately contacted the police station on his mobile phone. Within minutes another police car screeched to a halt outside Andre’s home with sirens blaring and blue lights flashing.

Unfortunately for Andre, he was at home. He had nowhere else to go. He lived with his overbearing elderly mother who hesitantly answered the door.

It’s a universal mystery as to why police cars turn on their sirens, alerting people that they are coming for them. Consequently, he took advantage of this misplaced warning and tried to escape out the back way. However, the police had anticipated his actions and were ready

for him. Handcuffs were placed on his wiry wrists and he was taken to the interview room at the police station, awaiting the arrival of inspector Traske.

On the way to the station, Traske made a detour via the hotel to pick up Sherlock Holmes. Everest was purposely left there, supporting the hotel bar. After all, this was a serious matter. The last person they wanted in the interview room was Everest with his meddling tongue.

Andre Helland was a tall, slim, good-looking young man in his mid-twenties. He was inappropriately dressed for the climate, wearing only shorts and a T-shirt, although he did fashion a multicoloured bobble hat and scarf which he refused to take off. He sat nervously twitching in the chair saying very little other than 'ingen kommentar'. He didn't ask for a solicitor. Most likely he realised that no one would take on his case.

Inspector Traske began the questioning in Norwegian.

'Did you murder Dasha, Holga and Helena?'

'Where were you on the 12th, 18th and 21st of this month?'

'What have you done with Greta?'

As to be expected, he didn't reply, so it was now down to Sheridan and Sherlock to use their deductive skills. Predictably, Sheridan was too uptight and emotional for his innermost processing power to work effectively. And if it did work, his subconscious certainly wasn't going to communicate with his conscious.

Sherlock Holmes, the ultimate private investigator and world-famous sleuth was, until very recently, unique in every respect. Very few knew of his son, Sheridan, who happened to have the combined genes (complete with the talents and quirks) of his father and his equally capable mother, Irene Adler. His son had somewhat overshadowed Sherlock over the past few days but that didn't mean to say that Sherlock's own deductive powers were in any way diminished. However, being in his mid-seventies, no longer was he sprightly or displayed an energetic enthusiasm for criminal anomalies: *The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,* he would often say. In one way, he was glad that his son was now on the scene to take over his work. He hoped that in the not too distant future, he would adopt the name of Holmes rather than Banner. Sheridan Holmes had a certain ring to it.

Just as Sherlock was about to start his own questioning, Andre Helland had something very relevant to say – in English.

'I need to go to the toilet.'

This was an untimely irritation for the police officers in the room although Sherlock had immediately recognised the importance of his request.

‘Okay, in a minute,’ said Sherlock. ‘Graves’ disease is treatable you know. How long have you been bald?’

Sheridan googled Graves’ disease on his phone, out of sight under the lip of the table. He wasn’t clued up on medical matters to his father's extent, but, no doubt, that would come with time and experience.

‘Well, well, that explains a lot,’ said Sheridan as he ingested facts from an appropriate website.

‘Son, you trivialised an important clue – the open window in Helena’s flat. It was open for a reason, not just a possible exit route. Never discount any fact no matter how small or insignificant it seems,’ said Sherlock.

‘Of course, one of the symptoms – oversensitive to heat! He opened the window to cool down. It was the only crime scene that was indoors,’ said Sheridan.

‘But it goes deeper than that, far deeper. Into the deepest realms of depravity and despicability, doesn’t it, Andre?’ said Sherlock.

A few cogs twirled in Sheridan’s head – not the complete gearbox but enough to realise what a monster they had before them.

‘You switched on the television in Helena’s flat to pass the time away whilst her dead body cooled down… before you raped her?’ suggested Sheridan.

‘I had the misfortune of experiencing a case similar to this, forty-odd years ago, but certainly not as depraved. At least then the corpses had died from accidental death, not murdered,’ said Sherlock.

‘If I don’t go now, I’ll crap all over your floor,’ said Andre Helland aggressively.

‘Take him!’ said Traske to one of the police officers standing at the back of the room. They all remained silent while Helland left the room.

‘Thought you should know, we found these at his house,’ said Traske.

Traske passed a small plastic tub of pills to Sheridan.

‘We found traces in Helena’s blood.’ Said Trask.

‘Fluni…trazepam,’ Sheridan read the label and then opened the lid and examined the pills.

‘Otherwise known as Rohypnol – knock-out pills,’ said Sherlock.

‘Well, there’s your proof, but where is Greta?’ fretted Sheridan.

‘Focus Son, certainly there’s hope for her yet. It’s highly probable that she is still alive,’ said Sherlock.

‘If she is still alive, she’ll be badly wounded. We have to find her and quickly,’ panicked Sheridan.

‘Clearly, Helland’s plan *was* to return to Greta later when she had cooled down. If you recall, in Holga’s case, the rock with blood on it had been disturbed. We knew it had been disturbed because the blood streaks were no longer vertical,’ said Sherlock.

‘Yes, you accused us!’ said Traske.

‘He obviously returned sometime later, after he had killed her. He must have disturbed the rock before raping her,’ said Sherlock.

‘So, summing up, he has a fetish for raping frozen corpses. What a sick bastard!’ said Mark.

‘Necrophilia, I believe is the correct term,’ said Sheridan quietly.

‘Remember, as yet, the only evidence we have is the Rohypnol tablets. We need to find Greta – alive,’ said Traske.

‘I suspect he’s wearing that scarf to hide some kind of injury,’ said Sherlock.

‘A bruise from one of Greta’s karate chops, I bet,’ said Sheridan.

‘If that’s right, there will definitely be his DNA on Greta’s boot and there’s your proof,’ said Sherlock.

Chapter 26

‘G’ for Greta

If Hammerfest happened to have the same concentration of CCTV cameras that London was often credited with, Greta most probably would have been found by now, but the excuse was always the climate. Apparently, the camera lens iced up, the focusing mechanisms seized or the electronics could cope with the cold. Consequently, they saved an awful lot of money by not bothering to install them.

Obviously, Andre Helland knew where Greta was but he was keeping that fact to himself. His mindset was heartless. If he *was* found guilty, four murders probably carried no more punishment than three. What had he got to gain by being merciful?

Everyone who could, helped in the search. The more people searching, the quicker Greta would be found. That was the general idea.

Two hours into the search and Greta was still missing. Sheridan was naturally at his wit's end.

It was now early evening and darkness was arriving far too quickly – not that it was particularly dazzling during the day. It would be difficult searching in the dark and by morning Greta would certainly be dead, if not dead already. Sheridan decided it was time to open up to his best new friend.

‘Is perfect happiness a myth, an unattainable dream? …I know what true love is now. It’s taken all my life to recognise it. Mark, she can’t die!’

‘Listen, there’s only one way we’re going to find her now and that’s you, pulling yourself together and using your unique abilities. If there’s anything, anything at all in the way of a clue, you have registered it. It’s in your bonehead somewhere. You have to concentrate. Cast your emotions to one side, you can do it!’ said Mark sternly. ‘Come on, let's start from the hairdressers again and this time let your inhibitions go.’

Sheridan took in what Mark said and smiled nervously.

Mark had blossomed into a true and dear friend. Sheridan

remembered his rude and abrupt beginnings. Such a complex individual whose childhood years had made him what he was – grumpy and critical. Now, however, he had mellowed, not perhaps to everybody, but certainly to his new friend and partner.

This time Sheridan had a revised approach. He looked around, scanned everything in his field of view – feelings developed. By the time he had walked to the top of the alleyway and along to the end of the street, he knew there was definitely something. He didn't know exactly what this 'something' was, but half the battle was over. He just had to communicate with his subconscious.

'Back to the hairdressers again,' said Sheridan.

'Again?'

'Yes, and again and again and again until things click into place,' said Sheridan.

'Will it help if your father is here?' Mark suggested.

'Certainly not, let him go up his own logical garden path. Have you ever thought that having my father watching over my shoulder could be my problem – causing some sort of blockage in my head? The fruits of my ability are something that can't be forced,' said Sheridan.

'Looks like someone's skidded on the snow here,' said Mark.

'I think that's a common occurrence in this town.'

'Skidded here as well.'

'Mark, do you mind, you're upsetting my concentration,'

'Sorry, I've looked for clues and I can't find any,' bleated Mark.

Sheridan felt a twinge of remorse. He decided to indulge for a moment in Mark's pointless observations.

'Oh yes, see what you mean, looks like whoever it was, lost their balance. Two long slips and then a fall,' theorised Sherlock.

And then instantly the penny dropped with a thud.

'Mark, you're a genius! Two long slips, dashes and a fall, a dot!'

'Don't keep me in ignorance of my brilliance,' said Mark.

'Don't you see, dash, dash, dot… dash, dash, dot.'

'Yes, dash, dash, dot?'

'G for Greta!'

'She's left a trail of clues,' said Mark.

‘Precisely! Ring Traske, tell him to look for symbols, scratches anything that resembles a Morse-code, dash- dash-dot pattern.’

Mark did this, but it was mostly pointless. Now Sheridan knew what to look for, it was relatively simple to spot the Morse-code pattern. Apart from a few precise skids in the snow-covered path, the code was also found rubbed on a dirty window. The trail led them to a secluded car park behind the shops and then the clues abruptly stopped.

‘We’re so close!’ fretted Sheridan.

‘Well, there’s nothing here apart from… oh, my God, that recycle bin!’ shrieked Mark.

Greta was found quickly, buried beneath several layers of newspapers and magazines. She had a severe head wound and was icy cold, but mercifully she was still breathing. Sheridan wept openly as he and Mark tossed the newspapers aside and gently lifted her out.

Chapter 27
Summing up

In all respects, Hammerfest was a modern town with an equally modern and well-equipped hospital. Ward 11 became Greta's new home for several days. Because of her serious head wound and severe hyperthermia, the doctors decided the best treatment was to medically induce a coma. On the fourth day, they withdrew the coma-inducing drug.

During this time, the small Norwegian island returned to normality. The only road connecting the island to the mainland was opened and the airport began scheduling incoming and outgoing flights once more. The cruise ship full of tourists, anchored in the harbour, was finally allowed to leave and the fishing trawlers were allowed to go and catch fish. With the borders open, the press and TV cameras flooded in from all over the world. They wanted to know every last detail about the case and the killer, who incidentally became known as '*The Rigor mortis rapist'* or '*Riggers'* for short. Sheridan Banner, Sherlock Holmes, Greta and Mark, were reported as the heroes. The amazing fact that Sherlock Holmes actually had a son, in itself, made worldwide news.

Not surprisingly, Andre Helland (*Riggers*) was, by far, the most notorious, debased, evil character ever known on the island – perhaps in the whole of Scandinavia. His sexual perversion of raping cold dead corpses was a unique case. Graves' disease was a contributing factor to his sickening behaviour, but there was no getting away from the fact that he was one very disturbed individual. The overwhelming consensus of public opinion was that he was an evil piece of sputum and that he should be duly punished for his grotesque crimes. Death was far too good for him.

All that remained was for the police and Mark to document the case. Mark decided to take over his father's role as narrator for this and all future cases of the Holmeses.

Perhaps clues were missed, but the criminal was caught and that's what mattered. A critical factor in the murders was that after killing his victims, *Riggers* waited for them to cool down from body temperature to a cold ambient temperature before he raped them. This was his monstrous perversion.

His first victim Holga, had her fingers nails manicured and shaped by Andre Helland. With his charmful patter, he quickly established that she worked in the housing department of the local council offices. This was the very department that had refused to find him a home, so he could get away from his mother. She told him all he needed to know: every evening she took her dog, Pepper, for a walk along the hillside. On the evening of the 12th, he followed her, killed her with a severe blow to the head with a rock and then left her to cool down. A couple of hours later he returned and raped her cold, stiff corpse.

The next victim, Dasha, also had her nails done by him. His charm loosened the tongues of even the shyest of his clientele. Her husband was a lecturer at the local college – the college that Andre Helland had attended before he was a manicurist. Dasha's husband was one of the lecturers who gave him persistently bad course marks, dashing his career hopes. That was enough to justify committing his heinous fetish on his defenceless wife. Regrettably, she had told him that she would be popping down to the supermarket later that evening on foot. It was a cold, crisp evening; he lay in wait for her in the quietest part of her route – the harbour. There he abducted and strangled her then lowered her into the icy cold water using a rope around her neck. Later that evening he returned, pulled her cold dead body out of the water with the rope still around her neck and raped her. After his evil deed, he callously pushed her back into the water.

Helena, his last victim, revealed many things to him whilst her nails were being manicured, including the fact that she was a policewoman. For many reasons, he hated the police. His plan began by hiding her scarf while she was in the salon. He then followed her home and after a while, knocked on her door. To Helena, he was kindly returning her scarf, so she welcomed him in and they chatted a while. He caught sight of the photograph and asked questions about it. She took the bait and while she was naming everyone in the photo, he sneaked the Rohypnol knockout pill into her glass of wine. He then left for a short time, while the drug took effect. When he returned, she was as planned, in a deep sleep on the sofa. Without any remorse, he went into her kitchen, took a knife out of the kitchen drawer and cold-bloodedly stabbed her in the neck. Now he had to wait for her body to cool down so he calmly sat beside her, turned on the television to pass the time and opened the window to let the icy cold air in. After a while, when she was as cold as the air in the room, he raped her.

The purpose of Sheridan returning to the flat earlier was to clarify a couple of facts. Firstly, he discovered that the door lock was still on the catch, holding the door unlocked. This action allowed the killer to easily gain entrance later on. This was a crucial fact missed by the

police and why Traske struggled to open the door. Secondly, he turned the television on, assuming that it would return to the channel last watched. It happened to be a motoring program channel, possibly a channel Helena would not have normally watched.

And so, the first official crime solved by the new partnership of Holmes and Son was duly documented by Mark Watson.

Chapter 28
Paper insulation

Greta sat up in bed. Most of her head was bandaged with just a curl or two of blonde hair poking through. They allowed her to apply a little makeup because she was about to have a visitor.

She wondered if he remembered what he said.

A familiar face popped around the curtain. Sheridan said nothing just beamed a smile.

‘I did well?’ said Greta.

‘Yes, you did well, but you nearly got yourself killed!’ said Sheridan sternly.

‘Did you like my trail?’

‘Lucky I knew what ‘G’ was in Morse code or we wouldn’t be here to talk about it,’ said Sheridan.

He bent over and kissed her gently on the forehead, then dragged a chair over and sat down next to her. He held her hand and squeezed it tightly.

‘I was sitting there, chatting away while he attended to my nails. He seemed a nice friendly chap. I asked him why he wore latex gloves. He said he was allergic to the products. Then it occurred to me that his gloves were covered with traces of my nails and skin, and if he kept using the same gloves, traces of other people’s nails and skin would be on them too.’

‘And fingerprints,’ added Sheridan.

‘Exactly. What if the murderer happened to use those particular gloves, I thought, that would explain the variety of DNA profiles… and fingerprints on the victims.’

‘You should have left it there but you didn’t, did you?’

‘My heart started racing, could he be the killer I thought? I had to put him to the test. I told him I was with the famous Sherlock Holmes.’

‘Oh, here we go, the perpetual shadow of my father,’ said Sheridan with a shrug and a wry smile.

‘Get over it,’ said Greta curtly. ‘I said we were getting very close to finding the killer, we think he was wearing latex gloves, just like those.’

‘He followed you, didn’t he?’ said Sheridan.

‘Yes, didn’t think he’d come after me straight away though.’

‘Convenient for him, I suppose. Kill you to keep you quiet and then rape you as a bonus.’

‘I had to come up with something quickly, so I left a trail of clues, the sort I hoped you’d fathom out.’

‘Actually, it was Mark who noticed the marks in the snow. I ignored him at first.’

Greta continued quietly, ‘After about the fourth dash, dash, dot, I began to doubt if it was ‘G’ in Morse code or was it ‘A’ or ‘N’?’

‘You could have just scraped ‘G’ in the snow?’ suggested Sheridan.

‘He knew my name was Greta. What if he saw the marks and rubbed them out?’

‘Good point!’

‘Anyway, I thought *I* could run, but holy Moses, could *he* run. He eventually cornered me in a secluded car park. I put up a good fight but he got me with a pipe or something.’

‘We found you in a bin under a pile of magazines and papers. They acted as a layer of insulation, helping you retain some of your body heat. You were certainly close to death when we found you. The cold apparently, stopped you from bleeding to death.’

‘I floated in and out of consciousness, never felt so cold in my life,’ said Greta.

‘Yes, but you’re here to tell the tale, thank God, and that’s all that matters.’

He pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed it. A few quiet moments glided by. Both were containing their emotions as best they could. Greta broke the silence first, ‘Do you, then?’

‘Do I what?’ said Sheridan abruptly.

‘What you said before I went to the hairdressers.’

‘What, I need time to think?’

‘No, a little bit after that.’

‘Did I say something after that? I Don’t remember.’

Greta was still weak and emotional – a shame Sheridan failed to recognise the symptoms. She released her grip on his hand and purposely changed the subject.

‘When do I get fed in here?’ she complained.

‘In about half an hour.’

‘Where’s Mark and Sherlock?’

‘Should be here shortly.’

‘Can’t wait,’ Greta snapped.

The prominent exposure of Sheridan throughout the media didn’t go unnoticed. Carol saw her husband with a new younger and prettier woman by his side. Daniel and Polly saw their dad. He was nothing less than a superhero.

Griselda Malvina saw her nemesis, ‘Finally, a worthy opponent.’

Chapter 29
Kung Fu business

In the large expanse of the departure lounge, Sheridan and Greta waved goodbye to Mark, Sherlock and in politeness, Everest. Sheridan and Greta were not accompanying them, they were booked on another flight to Sola airport near Sólborg – Greta's hometown.
Sheridan knew there were pressing matters at home that needed attending to, but first, he insisted on taking Greta home. It was a short two-hour flight to Sola, but it could be a long two-hour flight if they remained in denial. All Greta wanted him to say were three simple words… again, but she wasn't going to prompt him or encourage him. He had already admitted that he loved her to pieces, but that was to his new best friend Mark, not to Greta. Perhaps it was stubbornness or just plain bashfulness that prevented him from saying what he dearly wanted to say. He needed coaxing.

This was effectively done by a little white-haired old lady who sat on the aisle seat, next to Greta. Sheridan being a typical male had to have the window seat.

'You're newlyweds, aren't you,' she said.

'No, not even close,' said Greta as politely as possible.

'Well I'm no expert but you certainly love each other, no doubt about that,' said the old lady.

'You can tell?' queried Greta.

'Take it from me, dear, I know the signs. Life's too short for dilly-dallying, has he had his wicked way with you yet?' asked the old lady.

'Er, yes, a few times,' confessed Greta, somewhat taken aback by her question.

'Different in my day. We all used to make out we were lily-white until we got married but we weren't. You don't buy a bike until you've tried the saddle,' she said wisely.

Greta chuckled.

'So, how was the saddle?' asked the sweet old lady.

'It was… comfortable, but firm,' said Greta as accurately as she could.

‘I like you,’ said the old lady. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Sheridan.’

The sweet little old lady then raised her voice and aimed it at Sheridan who was peering out of the small window.

‘Young man! This young lady… sorry I didn’t ask you your name?’

‘Greta’

‘Greta… thinks the world of you, what are you going to do about it?’

For a second or two, he was taken aback but eventually, he gave a concise reply, ‘I’m going to marry her… if she’ll have me?’

‘She will! There, that wasn’t difficult, was it?’ said the old lady.

That was the last thing the old lady said before she fell asleep. This was inconvenient because Sheridan was desperate for a pee but he hadn’t the nerve to disturb her.

They drew up in a taxi outside Greta’s house; there was a small car on the drive.

‘It’s alright, it’s only my mum. She comes over sometimes to do a bit of cleaning for me.’

‘*Only* your mum!?’ shrieked Sheridan nervously.

‘It’s alright, she won’t bite,’ said Greta calmly.

Greta wore her little yellow woolly hat to hide her partially shaved head and large sticking plaster. She hoped her mother wouldn’t ask her to remove it. For Sheridan, it was a nerve-wracking experience. What if her mother didn’t approve? After all, she was married – to someone else. The door swung open well before they reached it.

‘Greta min Engel!’ cried Greta’s mum emotionally and then gave her a huge hug.

Her English was very poor, normally relying on Greta if there was any translating to be done, but this was a special occasion.

‘Sherry… dan Pleased… to… meet… you,’ said her mother.

‘You’ve been practising!’ said Greta.

‘Thank you, thank you… very… much!’ said Greta’s mother.

She then proceeded to give Sheridan a tight bear hug. Sheridan hadn’t realised it until now but they were worldwide news. At face value, Sheridan had saved Greta’s life with his bravery and unique talents.

Although in truth, Sheridan was wholly responsible for bringing danger into Greta's life in the first place. Fortunately, Greta's mother was unaware of this.

'I always said this kung fu business would get you into trouble,' scolded Greta's mother in Norwegian.

Sheridan had to stay for Lunch. There was certainly a language barrier, but the time went well. Greta did a considerable amount of translating and endured a lot of embarrassing moments that only mothers can provide. Sheridan increasingly became uneasy and fidgety. He had something to say – in Norwegian.

'Jeg… elsker… datteren… din. Jeg onsker a gifte seg med Greta … vennligst.'

Greta's mother instantly burst into tears and Greta followed suit. It wasn't quite the reaction he was expecting. Sheridan began to wonder if his pocket translator had translated accurately. Eventually, Greta's mother spoke in perfect English, 'You have my blessing.'

Later on, in the afternoon, Greta accompanied Sheridan back to the airport. She desperately wanted to go with him to England, but it was out of the question. She had to rest and recover from her head injury and besides, Sheridan didn't want her exposed to any more danger – for now.

'Stay safe and get plenty of rest. I want you as good as new when I get back,' said Sheridan assertively.

'I'll do my best, Mr Banner.'

'And no more chatting up strange men in pubs. You took a chance and it paid off, once. It may not pay off again,' said Sheridan sternly.

'You reckon?'

They hugged and kissed and then Sheridan disappeared through passport control.

This time Sheridan didn't have a window seat, not even an aisle seat. He decided that if he ever became Prime Minister, the first law he would pass would be to have a separate place on aeroplanes for morbidly obese people. Two hours squeezed between two huge blobs, oozing well past their armrests was unfair and certainly unpleasant.

Chapter 30

Bureaucracy

England was presently a severely troubled place suffering from a threatened regime, a threatened police force and a threatened judicial system. Griselda Malvina was well and truly pulling all the strings. It was not a safe place to be especially if you were out to topple her powerful position over the rich, powerful and influential.

When the plane finally came to a standstill at Heathrow, he tried to call Mark on his mobile. There was no reply. He tried to call his father, Sherlock – no reply. In desperation, he phoned his uncle Mycroft – no reply. Then, when he had disembarked, it got a whole lot worse. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Police officers flooded into passport control and surrounded him like hounds around a fox. Perhaps the London police were confused and thought Sheridan was the *rigour mortis rapist*. But no, apparently, he had committed an equally heinous crime.

'Sheridan Banner, I am arresting you for rape and sexual abuse of a minor. You do not have to say anything… etc. etc.' said the police officer.

While he had been away, Britain had become a worrying place to be in. The police were not entirely to blame, they were simply doing their job, acting on instructions from above. A young woman had come forward and accused Sheridan Banner of raping her, seven years ago, when she was thirteen. Of course, the woman in question had never met Sheridan in her life, but she had received a tidy sum for her lies. The charges were naturally laughable. Her heroin addiction corrupted any morality she may have had, but it was her word against his and Sheridan was at an immediate disadvantage – he had a penis.

The interview room was much like all the others – bare, apart from a table and a couple of chairs.

'I'm parched, do you think I could have a mug of tea?' asked Sheridan, trying to make light of the situation.

'Don't see why not. Philips, do the honours. Two sugars for me,' said Grimes, the police inspector.

'One sugar for me,' said Sheridan.

Nothing was said for a few minutes while they waited for the tea.

Finally, Philips arrived. The interview could now begin.

‘You do realise this is ridiculous,’ said Sheridan.

‘Rape and sexual abuse is a serious crime especially when a minor is involved,’ said the interviewing officer.

‘I’m aware of that, but this epidemic of false accusations is making a mockery of what *is* a serious crime and highly wearisome for you. You know I’m no more guilty of this crime than the queen is.

‘That is for the courts to decide,’ said Inspector Grimes.

‘I suppose you’ve arrested Mycroft Holmes, Mark Watson and Sherlock Holmes for similar jumped-up charges? As you no doubt know I’m Sherlock Holmes’s son. Don’t you think it’s a bit fortuitous that three related people are all charged with an identical offence?’

‘He has a point, sir,’ said Officer Philips.

‘They have all been accused of a serious crime, we have to follow procedures,’ insisted Grimes. ‘If you are innocent, you can clear your name in your trial, but in the meantime, you will have to be retained. Regretfully, bail is not offered for the offence you have been charged with.’

‘This is ridiculous, when will this *trial* be?’

‘Depends, the courts are especially busy at the moment in time, could be two months, could be more.’

Predictably, Sheridan was speechless. The only way out of this bureaucratic nonsense was for him to formulate a plan. After several seconds, his speech came back.

‘Okay, okay, I can see I’m not going to get anywhere,’ said Sheridan as he leaned over and hit the stop button on the sound recorder. ‘Right, off the record, you damn well know this is a false accusation. I intend to put an end to this subjugation of fabricated sexual abuse claims but I can’t do it alone.’

Sheridan had already used his powers of deduction and other skills, to do a character assessment of the police officers. Nothing untoward jumped out at him. Philips had two young children, a daughter under ten and a younger Son. The blue chalk mark on his cuff and a loom band bracelet on his wrist indicated this. Grimes had no children but faint lipstick marks on his cheek, clearly a morning goodbye kiss suggested that he was happily married. Certainly, no signs of either of them having an affair or wearing corsets or having a drinking problem this time. This was good because he was relying heavily on the police officers being decent rational thinking human beings who could see

the absurdity of it all. The officers looked at each other and then at Sheridan, with a nod of understanding and sympathy.

‘I completely understand what you are saying but, as I’ve said, we have to follow up all accusations of this type and act according to the wishes of the Child abuse investigation command. Our hands are tied,’ said Grimes as he sipped his tea.

‘I understand,’ said Sheridan ponderously ‘There was someone else, Everest Pritchard, he was with my father and Mark Watson. No doubt, he went free?’

‘We only have charges against Mr Watson and Mr Holmes,’ said Philips as he sipped his tea.

‘You have to find Everest Pritchard. He is the key to the end of all this. Shouldn’t take much finding, he has a habit of annoying people. He’s probably getting a bloody nose at this very moment,’ said Sheridan.

‘Unless there is a charge against him, there’s little we can do,’ said Grimes.

‘Find him and charge him with withholding evidence regarding serious sexual abuse of a child. That should do for now,’ said Sheridan

‘I thought you wanted to put an end to false accusations.’ said the inspector.

‘For once it isn’t a false accusation.’

‘You have proof?’ asked inspector Grimes.

‘Not yet but it will come. For a while now, your superiors at the top have been manipulated by threats of fabricated abuse charges. Not just your superiors, MP’s, Senior civil servants, people in high places, people in powerful positions, they’re all being controlled and they’re jumping through the hoops.’

‘Whose threatening them?’ asked Philips, sipping more of his tea.

‘A woman called Griselda Malvina.’

‘Even if what you say is correct, it makes no difference, we still can’t release you,’ said Grimes finishing off his tea.

‘You already have done, but before I go, make sure you find Pritchard. Let me know when you have him!’ said Sheridan assertively.

Chapter 31
Stuff of dreams

Sheridan had changed. Now he was full of confidence. He had surprised himself, no longer the surrendering wimp. Of course, Greta had a lot to do with it. Behind every great man, there's a great woman. Perhaps Carol, his estranged wife, wasn't all that great.

The police officers thought Sheridan's last words were wishful thinking but they weren't. Seconds later, both officers were slumped across the table, out cold.

The Rohypnol tablets had taken effect.

Several days ago, Inspector Traske had allowed Sheridan to examine the bottle of Rohypnol knock-out pills. This was the drug that Andre Helland (*Riggers*) had placed in Helena's wine. While he was examining the contents, with his sleight-of-hand skills, he surreptitiously removed a few pills out of the bottle. He anticipated that they would come in handy – just like his little tube of superglue. Four loose pills at the bottom of his pocket went unnoticed when he had his pockets searched earlier. Again, with his sleight-of-hand skills, Sheridan managed to drop two pills in each of the Police officer's teas as he leant over to turn the sound recorder off.

'They've let me off on a technicality!' he cheered to several other Police officers, as he walked calmly down the corridor, through reception and out of the front entrance.

The game was now afoot. It was paramount that Malvina's evil regime was squashed and she was held to account. A to-do list formed in his head. Priority was to hire a car.

He knew as soon as Malvina discovered that he had escaped police custody, he would conveniently become the most wanted criminal in the country. Sheridan had to disappear, but just before he did, he thought he'd pay his work colleagues a visit, catch up on a few things, empty his desk drawer and wisely hand in his resignation.

The most effective way to disappear would be to adopt a suitable disguise. His father was famous for masquerading as other colourful characters including tramps, sailors etc, during his cases. These were mostly examples of dressing down; Sheridan thought it would be preferable to improve his appearance instead. A stylish modern

haircut with a few grey hairs touched up, would be a start. There was no denying that his hair had grown into an untidy mop over the last few weeks. After an eyebrow trim, much shorter sideburns and a facial scrub, he looked somewhat different. Some may say, younger and perhaps better looking. Sunglasses and a three-piece designer suit completed the suave appearance. He contemplated changing his name to Dan but decided to stick with Sheridan – it suited him.

He bought a couple of unregistered SIM cards for his mobile phone, took a substantial amount of money out of a cash machine and then hired a car. He was aware that he could be traced through the hire car so he found a quiet car park and swapped the registration plates from another older car. Surely, now he was undetectable.

It wasn't long before the Press and Media homed in on the escaped dangerous child abuser, rapist. It made matters worse being the son of the well-known *gay* Sherlock Holmes, who also happened to be accused of a similarly heinous crime. And then, when the nation found out that Mycroft, his uncle was also locked up for child abuse, the whole Holmes family became condemned. It seemed that no one stopped to think for a moment that it was all a little too convenient and a little too circumstantial. The trial by media was a very persuasive machine.

The next priority was to see his children. He had to ring Carol…

'Hi, it's me.'

'Oh, finally, you've decided to ring?' said Carol abruptly.

'I'd like to see the children if that's okay?'

'What, trust you with the kids after what you've done?'

'You know me better than that.'

'Well, you know where they live!'

'You know I can't come there. Please, bring the kids to the Lake car park at Dimchurch woods this afternoon at 4 o'clock.'

'Where the hell is that?'

'Put it in the Sat Nav. It's about four miles from you.'

'Why, the hell, should I?'

'For the children's sake. By the way, I've put £50,000 into our joint account.

It was exactly how he wanted the conversation to go – cold, no love

lost and concise. He wondered how he would have felt if he hadn't met and fallen in love with Greta. He used to think he loved Carol, but those days had expired. He must have loved her at some time. Why else would he have married her and brought two beautiful children into the world together? However, Greta was true love, the kind of love that hurts like a water infection while they were apart. It was never like that with Carol. Perhaps love is relative. Everything else in life is relative, why shouldn't love also follow the same protocols, he thought?

Perhaps it wasn't completely ethical, but Marius was dead. He had no family (most likely) and fundamentally he was a double-crosser who ponged a bit. Hence, his fishing trawler required adoption. Sheridan decided to take on the role and then sell it. Perhaps he let it go too cheaply but one million kroner sounded like an awful lot of money on the day (the day that Greta so regretfully visited Debonairs). A million krone equated to approximately £100,000. Half of this, he placed in his joint account and the other half he transferred into Greta's bank account. Perhaps in fairness, he should have shared it out with Mark and Sherlock, but surely, his father had loads of money and Mark… perhaps he would square up with him later!

Sheridan had to be careful, cover every eventuality, therefore, he parked on a nearby car park a short distance through Dimchurch woods. He walked to the Lake car park with a carrier bag full of old bread and waited. Predictably, his estranged wife was over ten minutes late, but he refused to let this trivial matter bother him. He could see Daniel and Polly, bouncing with excitement on the back seat, as the car pulled onto the car park. Sheridan's heart raced more than it had done for days. Their father could have been a mass-murdering monster and it wouldn't have made the slightest difference. Their love for their daddy was unconditional. Carol opened the rear car doors, Daniel and Polly sprang out and raced across the car park. Carol was clearly taken aback by Sheridan's new appearance. She hated him but sort of fancied him all over again. She put her tail between her legs and stumbled back into the car.

'Wow, you look cool, Dad!' said Daniel.

'Daddy, why have you got a lady's haircut?' asked Polly innocently.

'You look like James Bond,' said Daniel. 'Have you got a gun?'

'No I haven't, have you been doing your homework?' asked Sheridan.

'Of course, I have!' snapped Daniel.

'He hasn't Daddy. He's been playing games all the time,' said Polly.

They walked over to the children's area, chatting as they went. Daniel could work the swing himself but Polly had to be pushed. Then they went to the seesaw. Sheridan and Polly sat at one end and Daniel at the other. Dad worked the seesaw, Polly screamed with delight and Daniel wanted to go higher. Then the climbing frame, Daniel was the first to the top. Sheridan took a few photos on his phone. Polly couldn't make it to the top, but he still praised her. Then they walked over to the ducks on the lakeside and fed them with the old bread. Sheridan realised that this was the stuff dreams were made of, the experience couldn't help but refresh his soul.

Fifteen minutes of bliss passed by before he heard distant police sirens.

'I've got to go now. Quickly, both of you, back to the car.'

'Oh, it's not fair, can't you come home now?' asked Polly.

'I need help with my homework,' said Daniel.

'Help with a computer game more like,' said Dad. 'I've got a few things to do but I'll see you both very soon.'

'Love you, Daddy, be careful,' Polly shouted back as she walked back to the car.

Sheridan fought back a tear; she was growing up far too quickly. He glanced at Carol, his response to her treachery and deceit was a slow shake of his head which said it all. She looked down – perhaps in shame.

The police cars were almost at the car park entrance – he had to run. He couldn't look behind, if he tripped over a branch or rock, that would be it. A couple of minutes later, he was screeching off in the hire car. It was close, too close. His heart raced and his lung hurt, he really had to get in shape. No doubt Greta would see to that.

He knew he couldn't relax. The police would have their eyes peeled, not to mention setting up roadblocks. Helicopters would soon be flying overhead with infrared cameras. After all, he was portrayed as a rapist, a sex fiend and anything else that Griselda could come up with. It seemed only his children could see through to the truth.

Fortunately, he made it to the nearest town, Brentwood, four miles away. A police helicopter could be heard some distance off wasting aviation fuel. He parked up and merged with the pedestrians of the bustling town.

Chapter 32
A detective inspector

Sheridan's mobile phone rang.

'You do you realise, I've had a headache ever since.'

'Well, well, Inspector Grimes! How the hell did you get this number?'

'You've been careless… from your wife's phone.'

Sheridan was angry with himself. A stupid mistake, totally unprofessional. He had forgotten to remove the SIM card after he called Carol. The call had to be short, his exact position could easily be traced whilst the SIM remained in his phone.

'Thought you'd like to know, we have Pritchard in custody.'

'That was quick. Hope he's annoying you. Can I get you on this number?' asked Sheridan.

'Yes.'

'Okay, I'll ring you when I'm ready.'

Immediately, Sheridan took the back off his mobile phone and extracted the SIM card out of its socket.

Sheridan desperately needed help. Despite his many talents, he couldn't do this alone. He thought about members of his long-standing family – two uncles and a brother-in-law. They were fine, trustworthy people, but not exactly British agent material. He had several work colleagues, but they were basically arseholes. He realised that his one and only true friend, even though he didn't fully appreciate it, was Mark, but he was locked up.

There was one person.

They had never met, but apparently, he had always served his father well. There wasn't a lot to go on, all he had was the letter 'G' preceding the relatively unusual name of Lestrade.

Brentwood library provided free internet access. However, in this instant, the world-wide-web wasn't all it was cracked up to be. To use the online Directory enquiries service you had to register, which involved setting up an account, etc, etc. Certainly not a wise thing to do under the circumstances. The library still stored over eighty of the

old-fashioned telephone directories, covering virtually the whole of England. It looked like it was the only way forward. It was just a matter of searching each one for a 'G Lestrade', hoping that he wasn't ex-directory. Because Inspector Jackson at Southampton police station, let it slip that he had worked with him, Southampton was a logically starting place, but no luck there. Three hours later, he was hungry, thirsty and had drawn a blank. Nearly at the point of giving up, but with only three directories to go, he decided to go to the bitter end. Finally, in the seventy-third directory, a G Lestrade was listed in Yeovil.

'Yessss!!' he shouted out loud, disturbing the peace of the library.

It was a shot in the dark, it could be any old G Lestrade. It was highly probable that the real Inspector Lestrade was ex-directory, but it was all he had to go on. It was too risky to use the hire car so he abandoned it and bought a train ticket.

After a long train journey, a long walk across town and a meal on the way, he stood outside the elusive address he had taken so long to find. Eventually, the front door opened. An old scruffily dressed man grunted at the entrance.

'Yes?!

'Inspector Lestrade?' asked Sheridan hesitantly.

'No Inspector here!' Lestrade continued to grunt.

Sheridan's spirit sank. It appeared that it had been a completely wasted journey. He had one last desperate try.

'*G* Lestrade then?' asked Sheridan hopefully.

'Who wants to know?!'

'Sherlock Holmes's son.'

'Well stop standing on ceremony! Come in, come in!' said Lestrade abruptly.

The years hadn't fared well with the old man. He now wore a distinct stoop, heavily wrinkled complexion and a wiry frame. This was not at all how Sheridan had imagined him. He had been completely fooled by the media, conveniently using old stock photos whenever his name cropped up – not that that had happened for a while. Of course, he was now in his eighties, seventies, or nineties. Sheridan wasn't sure.

No matter, Sheridan was highly pleased with himself. He had successfully found *the* famous Inspector Lestrade. For a moment, he'd thought it had been a wasted journey but thankfully it wasn't.

Probably the only G Lestrade in the country was slouching in front of him. All the evidence suggested that Lestrade lived on his own. However, Sheridan thought it best not to be too inquisitive and use his unique skills to work out the details for himself. He wore a wedding ring, but his wife had passed away at least two years ago. The thickness of dust on top of the Mills and Boon paperbacks on the bookshelf revealed this fact. He worked in a charity shop. The assortment of old binoculars, cameras, old DVDs, board games, transistor radios and numerous slightly chipped Doulton figures lying around indicated this fact. But the foremost observation was that he was profoundly lonely. This required no sleuthing powers to deduce.

'No doubt you're following the News?' asked Sheridan.

'Be remiss of me if I wasn't… Yes, I can see the likeness now. Well, well.'

Lestrade studied Sheridan's face a little closer, 'Good heavens, I can see your mother's eyes. Irene Adler, now that was a case and a half.'

'So, I believe. Anyway, inspector Lestrade, I need your help.'

'Gilbert please, now I've retired. Those were the best of days… Me, Holmes and Watson, solved some cases between us, I might tell you!'

'Er, yes, so I believe… Gilbert,' said Sheridan insincerely.

'So, you're a wanted man. Child abuse, rape and all manner of heinous crimes, and I'm an ex-detective inspector. You've come to me to give yourself in, then?'

'What do you think?' said Sheridan rhetorically.

'We live in terrible times, that's a fact. Are you as good as your father?'

'On another level entirely,' said Sheridan flippantly.

'I certainly hope you are. Structure and values are ebbing away with this wave of trial by media hysteria.'

Lestrade poked the log fire and then eased himself into his armchair.

'There's some vintage port over there, pour yourself a glass.'

'I'm okay, thanks – need to keep alert,' said Sheridan.

'Well, you could pour me one!' snapped Lestrade.

'I'd love a coffee,' said Sheridan hopefully.

'Make yourself one then! Stuff's in the kitchen,' said Lestrade continuing in an abrupt tone.

It was a challenge finding the ingredients, namely the coffee. The kettle was on the blink but eventually managed to produce warmish water although not hot enough to dissolve the granules. He gave up on the sugar and milk, not having enough time to do a full-scale search of the kitchen. Returning to the living room, Lestrade had nodded off in his old, worn comfy chair. Sheridan noisily placed a glass of port on the table beside him.

'What…who, yes, as I was saying… what was I saying?' said Lestrade in a moment of sleepy confusion.

'You said structure and values are ebbing away with this wave of trial by media hysteria.'

'Oh yes, that was it! No one dare do anything about it in case they end up being trialled by the media machine.'

'All driven by Griselda Malvina,' said Sheridan.

'Yes, so I believe. God knows why they don't get someone to bump her off?' said Lestrade.

'Tut-tut, a police Inspector advocating that kind of action?' said Sheridan.

'Ex, police *detective* inspector.'

'How come you know about her?' asked Sheridan. 'The police seem to be a little ignorant on that fact.'

'Old habits. Keep my ear to the ground. These days, if it doesn't come up on a computer screen, they're lost.'

'Anyway, it's not as simple as just bumping her off, as you said. There are a lot of innocent people locked up who need their names cleared and the only way to do that is to expose her.'

'So, what exactly are you proposing?' asked Lestrade.

'There's only one way really, we entrap her!'

If Sheridan had a choice, it would have been Greta or Mark or inspector Traske or even his father, but *Gilbert* Lestrade, ex-detective inspector, was all there was left. He just had to do. On the positive side, he had years of experience and most importantly, some very useful contacts.

The next day, they both travelled to London on the train. Sheridan told Lestrade the whole story: from the chess pieces to his wife having an affair – which was perfectly alright because he had met Greta. Of course, there was a lot in between: the cryonics facility, Marius and his Trawler and the rigour mortis rapist, all of which, when related

back, seemed a tad fanciful.

After all this, he told Lestrade his plan.

Firstly, they needed to find precisely where Malvina lived. Sheridan vaguely assumed that she lived in London. When you have most of the male gentry's love tackle firmly in your hand, it's convenient to be within shouting distance of the majority of your targets. No doubt, her phone number would be ex-directory, so looking in the phone book or online would be pretty pointless. However, she was wealthy beyond words and wealthy people, especially evil wealthy people, tend to flaunt it.

'I believe she's chauffeured around in a black Rolls with private plates,' stated Lestrade.

'That's exactly what I expected. Have you kept in contact with any of your former colleagues?

'No, not really. A chap called Jackson took over my job – a complete arsehole,' said Lestrade.

'Met him, wears a corset, you know.'

'Not surprised. Now then, there was a detective inspector who I'm pretty certain would help us. Met him a few times – a decent cop. We used to call him Sooty, what the hell was his name?'

'Grimes?' suggested Sheridan.

'On the tip of my tongue.'

'Grimes?' suggested Sheridan again.

'That was it, Detective inspector Grimes. You've met him?'

'Yes, unfortunately, I had to dose him with Rohypnol, but that aside, he seems to be on the side of common sense,' said Sheridan.

'There you are then! He'll find out where Malvina lives,' said Lestrade while clicking his fingers.

The fact that Sheridan was the most wanted person in England, never left his mind. It was completely farcical of course, but to make matters worse, his fabricated crimes were cruelly compounded by the Media. His new modern haircut and sunglasses disguised him to some extent, but in the busy streets of London, he felt exposed, he needed something else. A flat cap did the trick perfectly. He could have gone for a deer-stalker hat, but that was an image he definitely wanted to avoid. Not that he needed to be any taller but a new pair of shoes with one-inch heels were also purchased.

As suggested by Lestrade, a quick phone call to Inspector Grimes was all it took. After a short taxi ride, they were standing outside Bishop's court in Knight Street, Notting Hill. It was probably one of the most exclusive places to live in the country.

They both stood on the pavement beneath the palatial building for several minutes, gazing upwardly, surmising which apartment was Malvina's. Then the pennies dropped. Sheridan glanced at the street name *on the building* and then the building name *on the building* – Knight Street, Bishop Court.

'What a dip stick, the chess pieces! We didn't have to ask Grimes, I knew all the time where she lived,' Sheridan groaned.

'Not following?'

'I told you about the chess pieces. I had a white bishop. Look, a white building called Bishop's court and Mark had a black knight, Knight Street, black tarmac. Completely unforgivable.'

'Yes, could do better,' said Lestrade sternly.

Chapter 33
Bronzed butler

Naturally, accusing Malvina of anything more than leaving a light switched on, would be pointless. Outwardly, she was squeaky clean and law-abiding – a model citizen. She got others to do her dirty work. They found women absent of any moral principles to lay out the false accusations. She got others to find clients who cheated in life and then wanted to cheat in death. However, somehow, she had to communicate with these *other* people. The only way to incriminate her was to catch her in the act of communicating.

It was an old, overused method but Sheridan was convinced it was the best way. A listening device planted secretly in her room would reveal everything.

State-of-the-art electronic listening devices are now very simple in principle, but highly effective in their operation. They are discrete, miniature devices that perform similarly to a mobile phone. When the unique mobile number is called, the 'bug' switches on and the caller can listen to the sounds that it picks up without any indication that the device is working. The advantage of this readily available device is that it can be accessed from anywhere in the world where there is a mobile phone network.

As it happened, he had previously removed a couple of these useful devices, gathering dust in his drawer at his former workplace. Exactly why they were there was not clear except for the fact that Sheridan had a certain fascination for small electronic gadgets, especially ones available online from China. All he had to do was discretely plant one of these devices somewhere in Griselda Malvina's luxury penthouse suite. What could go wrong?

Sheridan enabled an App on his phone that records calls made on his smartphone. Then he made a call to the 'bug'.

'There, I'll leave my phone with you. It's connected to the listening device. You should hear everything it picks up.'

'Smoke and mirrors!' said Lestrade, somewhat impressed.

'No, 3G and EE. Wait here, shouldn't be long,' said Sheridan to

Lestrade.

Moments later, he was in the lift on the way up to the thirty-ninth floor. The doorman had eagerly given him the number of her apartment. It was all far too easy. Perhaps visiting Griselda was something you only did if you were mad or had the terrible misfortune to be summoned by her.

Room 221b, ('b' for bridal suite) happened to be her lavish, palatial and permanent residence. The number seemed familiar. He knelt before the expensive oak door and undid one of his shoelaces. For some reason, he was nervous. His hand trembled as he knocked on the door. The door buzzed and moments later, opened automatically.

'Come in, come in. Welcome to my humble abode,' said Malvina. It was in no way humble.

The most exotic, flamboyant silk curtains draped the huge mock Georgian windows of the immense apartment. Dedon and Cassina furniture tastefully filled the room and numerous Persian rugs covered the solid maple floor.

'Well, well, what a pleasant surprise, Sheridan Banner, son of Sherlock Holmes. I've been so looking forward to seeing you.'

Malvina remained where she draped herself, on a red velvet chaise lounge. She was in her sixties, perhaps seventies and dressed, or more accurately, undressed, in a long see-through, lace negligee. To add a margin of decency, the negligee was partially covered in a loosely fitting maroon silk dressing gown. Whilst Sheridan emotional adjusted himself to the disturbing sight displayed before him, a young, bronzed, muscle-bound man dressed only in a pink pinafore, walked into the room.

'This is Claude, my butler,' said Malvina.

Before Sheridan could react, the butler was frisking him from shoulders to ankle. It was a thorough search. A remaining Rohypnol tablet, a tube of superglue and a listening device were found about his person.

'Sheridan, Sheridan, I'm surprised at you. You were trying to bug me!' said Malvina as she submerged the small listening device into her large glass of Sancerre on the table beside her.

Sheridan made no attempt to hide his disappointment. It appeared that his plan was scuttled before it had begun.

'So, dear, dear Sheridan, what can I do for you?' asked Malvina all motherly.

‘Nothing now, really,’ said Sheridan brightly. ‘I was hoping to find a way to clear my name. You know, the false allegations you’ve stitched me up with, but I can see I will have to try harder.’

Malvina said nothing, just smiled and glanced at his shoe.

‘Your shoelace is undone, don’t want you tripping up and hurting yourself,’ she said with misplaced concern.

Sheridan knelt down; his heart raced. He tied his laces but clumsily, as he attempted to stand up, lost his balance all fell embarrassingly onto a receptive Malvina, draped on the chaise lounge.

‘Oh Sheridan, why didn’t you say! You don’t have to force yourself on me’

Then, a very strange thing happened. Whilst Sheridan was still in close proximity to excessive buxomness, her facial expression suddenly became sombre and her voice trembled. She pulled him even closer towards her.

‘Help me, please help me, she’s out of control, too strong, far too strong now,’ she whispered.

Then, instantly she changed back, unaware of what she had just said.

Claude, is the passion bed prepared?’

‘Yes, my lady.’

Sheridan hastily jumped to his feet and straightened his jacket.

‘Sorry, sorry. I’m a little pushed for time. Maybe some other time,’ Sheridan lied.

‘Well, well, Mr Banner, I must say, I’m very disappointed in you. When will I see you again?’ asked Malvina.

‘Shortly, very shortly.’

This sort of taunt annoyed Malvina more than almost anything else. She was offering her body on a plate to Sheridan and he flatly turned her down. He wondered what other horrendous crimes she would now arrange to be added to his portfolio. Perhaps assault and rape on a poor frail old lady.

However, this aside, for a few seconds, he had seen another side of her.

Chapter 34

Decoy

Not long after this surreal encounter with, apparently, the evilest woman in the world, Sheridan was enjoying a large latté with Lestrade in a nearby café.

'Well, that was a damn waste of time. Didn't you think there was a possibility of being frisked?' said Lestrade.

'Counted on it,' said Sheridan.

'You counted on it?' snapped Lestrade.

'Surely you have more faith in me than that. I had two bug devices, the other one I glued to the soul of one of my new shoes. That's why I went for one-inch heels, so the bug would conceal against the lip of the heel.'

'Very clever. Seems as though you are a match for your father. Must admit, I did think it was an odd time to buy a pair of shoes,' said Lestrade.

'I removed the bug while I was tying my shoelaces. The worst part, which will probably give me nightmares for years, was pretending to lose my balance and falling onto her. While I was buried in the intimacy of her insufficient attire, I shoved the bug down the crevice of the chaise lounge.'

'Very impressed! The other bug she found in your pocket was a decoy, then?'

'Precisely!'

Lestrade handed the mobile phone to him, it was still connected to the decoy bug. Sheridan ended the call and dialled a different number – the number corresponding to the other bug. It was working perfectly and relayed every sound in Malvina's apartment to his phone. He put it on loudspeaker:

'Claude, where's that naughty Mr Banner now?'

'In Starbucks, Castle Street, Ma'am.'

'Inform the police, will you.'

'Already done so, Ma'am.'

‘Such a shame, never mind… Claude, I believe it’s time for my massage.’

‘Right away Ma’am.’

‘How the hell? I better go!’ panicked Sheridan.

‘Sounds like she’s had someone tailing you!’ suggested Lestrade.

Lestrade was right, there was a suspicious character with a long coat and a huge brimmed hat, across the street from the coffee shop. He was doing his best not to stare at them, but failing completely.

Moments later, the wail of police cars could be heard rapidly approaching.

‘You stay here, finish your coffee. I’ll meet you outside The Daily Express offices in one hour,’ said Sheridan.

‘And where might that be?’

‘Fleet Street, I should imagine.’

With that, Sheridan sprinted over to the staff room door, punched in the correct code on the keypad door lock and darted inside. This was a perfect example of how his unique mind functioned. Within his subconscious, in the deepest parts of his cerebellum, he had observed and noted the five-digit code the staff had overtly pressed on the keypad lock. *He* had also subconsciously identified all the staff and determined that none were in the staff room at that moment in time. When the time was right, his subconscious passed the information over to his conscious. It was a clean escape. He left by the rear entrance, opening onto a quiet back street. The bright strobe lights of the police cars, intermittently bathed the surrounding buildings in blue as he quietly walked away in the direction of Fleet Street.

Chapter 35
Old reprobate

‘We need to see the Editor, urgently!’ demanded Sheridan to the receptionist.

‘Have you an appointment?’

‘No.’

‘Who shall I say is calling?’

‘Sheridan Banner, child abuser, rapist and whatever else is charged against me. And this is retired Inspector Lestrade.’

‘*Detective* inspector,’ grumbled Lestrade.

The receptionist immediately picked up her desk telephone and had a quiet discussion with whoever was on the other end of the line.

‘Go right up. Room 1, eighth floor,’ said the receptionist.

‘That was easy,’ said Lestrade.

‘Once again, too easy,’ said Sheridan.

The lift ascended slowly and jerkily. It had clearly seen better days, or it just wanted oiling.

‘We’re walking into a trap, you do realise that,’ said Lestrade.

‘Obviously. Time to back out if you want to?’

‘I wouldn’t miss this for the world,’ said Lestrade eagerly.

The editor politely welcomed them into his office. Undoubtedly, he was being two-faced. That was his training: nice and friendly upfront, stab you in the back in the fullness of time. He knew, of course, exactly who his visitors were, he read and he wrote the papers. All he had to do was charm them, play for time and keep them there until the police arrived. Then the whole affair would be a scoop – just for his newspaper.

‘Please, sit down. How can I help you?’ said the editor.

‘You can start by listening to me. You know exactly who I am.’

‘Well if I do, you’ll know that the police will be here in about… ten minutes,’ said the editor.

‘Okay, fair enough, thanks for the warning. I have two minutes then? If there’s a fair and open-minded person somewhere inside you, you’ll know that I am no guiltier than you are. The same goes for Sherlock Holmes, Mycroft Holmes, Mark Watson, Sir Terrance Daze and many of the other prominent people recently charged with child abuse and so on,’ said Sheridan.

‘Continue,’ prompted the Editor.

‘It’s newspapers like yours that have encouraged the trial by media for these bogus abuse charges, now it’s time for you to make amends. Griselda Malvina, you’ve no doubt heard of her. She’s behind all this injustice, but no one dares reproach her for fear of being embroiled in false allegations. Terrance Daze tried it and look what happened to him!’

‘Exactly, so what do you expect me to do, commit professional suicide?’ said the editor.

‘Reading between the lines, then, you have an open mind, good. I’ve planted a listening device in Malvina’s room. My phone has been recording her conversations for the last two hours. The bug’s batteries should last a few hours. Hopefully, by then, there should be enough incriminating evidence to put her behind bars,’ said Sheridan confidently.

‘You’ll need more than that!’ said the editor. ‘You’re treading on dangerous ground. The press has already been drawn over the coals for phone hacking and anyway, it will be inadmissible in court.’

‘Don’t you believe it. I think you’ll find many a high court judge is desperate to put her away, but are terrified of being her target.’

It appeared that the Editor was sympathising with Sheridan but he had a couple of questions to ask, ‘Detective Inspector Lestrade, why are *you* here?’

‘To bear witness to what has been said here…I suppose.’

His next question was directed at Sheridan.

‘I see, so, taking on board what you’ve said, why the hell, are you hanging about here then? The police will be rushing through that door at any moment,’ said the Editor.

Sheridan made himself as comfortable as he could in the tubular framed chair, stretching out his legs and putting his hands behind his head. Lestrade decided to do the same.

‘What’s the point in running, they’ll track me down eventually,’ said Sheridan.

The Editor was right. Moments later, three policemen and a familiar face barged into the room. Sheridan turned around slowly.

‘Inspector Grimes! Couldn’t be better,’ cheered Sheridan.

‘I don’t know why you’re so pleased, I’ll have no alternative but to arrest you and this time you won’t get away so easily,’ said Grimes.

‘Fair enough,’ said Sheridan.

Up until now Lestrade had kept a low profile and hadn’t as yet turned around but his curiosity overcame him.

‘Well, well, look what the cat dragged in!’ said Lestrade jovially.

‘Well, if it isn’t that old reprobate, Lestrade. How the devil are you?’ asked Grimes with a broad smile.

‘Heh, less of the old! Good to see you, Donald,’ said Lestrade, they both shook hands and man-hugged.

‘Enjoying retirement?’

‘Like a hernia!’ replied Lestrade.

‘We’ve all missed you down at the Yard,’ said Grimes.

‘Ahem!’ interrupted the Editor. ‘If you don’t mind, I could do with my office back. I have a deadline to meet!’

‘How ungrateful can you get? The scoop of the year, probably the decade and he’s telling us to get out,’ said Lestrade, effectively dethroning the Editor’s haughty attitude.

‘You are aware that Sheridan is unquestionably innocent?’ he continued.

‘That was never an issue, but as you well know, I have to follow procedures,’ said Grimes.

‘Sheridan’s planted a listening device in Malvina’s apartment. It’s just a matter of time before she slips up and incriminates herself,’ said Lestrade.

‘Something I’m dying to know, where the hell, does Everest Pritchard fit into all this? He’s driving us crazy down at the station.’ asked Grimes.

‘Haven’t you figured it out yet?’ teased Sheridan. ‘Everest Pritchard is Malvina’s only Son. Sherlock, my father, reckoned he was the best bet of bringing down Malvina.’

‘Well, that explains a lot, but how’s a son supposed to do that to his mother?’ asked Grimes.

‘He was abused in the most shocking way possible by his mother,’ said Sheridan.

‘Well that probably explains a lot but it still doesn’t mean to say he’s going to drop his mother in it,’ said Grimes.

‘He will, give him time. He’s had a completely perverted upbringing, he lacks any moral standards… and fortunately, he has a loose tongue. Apparently, Malvina, his mother, still breastfeeds him when she has the opportunity and apparently, even now they share a bath together,’ said Sheridan.

The editor, Lestrade, Grimes and the other two police officers were aghast and all visibly squirmed at these facts.

‘So basically, his mother screwed up his life,’ said the editor, writing down much of what Sheridan said.

‘You could put it like that,’ said Sheridan.

‘How do you know all this?’ asked Grimes.

‘After a few pints of Norwegian beer, it’s amazing how people will open up.’

Sheridan thought it best to move on. He turned up the volume on his mobile phone, it was still connected to the listening device (bug) and recording. As it happened, it was the perfect moment to do so.

‘Claude! Where the hell’s my red mobile?’

‘In your dressing gown pocket Ma’am…’

‘Who the hell’s Claude?’ asked Grimes.

‘Sssh, uttered almost everyone in the room.

‘Put Brownset on… My dear Gerry, I need two of your best… The usual, child abuse and rape… I think Inspector Lestrade needs teaching a lesson… A grand each.’

‘*Detective* inspector,’ Lestrade quietly corrected his former title – again.

‘Well, well, Gerry Brownset, that’s a name I’ve tried to forget. Had a few run-ins with him in my early days,’ said Grimes.

‘Not a nice chap then?’ suggested Lestrade.

‘He ran half a dozen brothels and pimped half the girls south of the Thames,’ said Grimes.

‘Things are coming together nicely then,’ said Sheridan smugly.

Inspector Grimes took out his mobile phone and made the call.

‘Send an arrest team to room one, twenty-second floor, Bishops court, Knight Street. Charge Griselda Malvina with perverting the course of justice on seventeen counts – at least.’

Chapter 36
Reprisals

As is the way with the laws of the land, Sherlock, Mycroft, Mark, Terrance Daze and the other thirteen wrongly accused were not immediately released from their bleak and gruelling imprisonment. However, Malvina was arrested, charged and locked up straight away. Her trial would, no doubt, be an open and shut case, mainly because three of the falsely accused were high court judges.

The Daily Express was privileged to have the scoop story of the decade and in gratitude, rewarded Sheridan with a six-figure sum. He was certainly earning money a damn sight quicker than he did as a computer programmer.

Everest Pritchard was released soon after he had given evidence relating to his disturbing upbringing. He then went on to sell a slightly more embellished account about him and his mother to the press for a small fortune.

Three days later Sheridan pulled up outside the prison gates in his brand-new black Range Rover. It was slightly ostentatious, but regardless of what anyone else thought, *he thought* he owed it to himself. Sherlock, Mycroft and Mark were waiting by the roadside. They all looked a little older and greyer than they did a few weeks ago, but they were pleased to be out and to see Sheridan, even if they were slightly envious of the new car.

‘Well done my boy,’ said Sherlock.

‘Yes, well-done nephew,’ said Mycroft.

‘Er, well-done mate,’ said Mark… ‘Nice motor.’

‘So where to?’ asked Sheridan, complete with sunglasses, a new hairstyle and a flat cap.

There was no need for his subtle disguise anymore, however, this was the new Sheridan. He liked it – it suited him – it was staying. The others said absolutely nothing about the new Sheridan. He took that as approval, perhaps even a compliment.

‘Baker Street! Today is Tuesday and Mrs Hudson always bakes cakes today,’ said Sherlock loudly and positively.

Sheridan set the sat-nav to 221b Baker Street and set off. The mood was restrained, there was a lot to talk about but no one particularly wanted to talk. Sheridan had only one person on his mind – Greta, the love of his new life. Sherlock, Mycroft and Mark watched the world go by with a chorus of silent smiles. It was a dull and overcast morning, but that didn't matter. The outside world of traffic, shops, buskers, pedestrians, taxis etc, etc, all depicted freedom, something they had never fully appreciated before.

'Mrs Hudson? Is she still alive, she must be in her nineties now?' asked Sheridan, long after the moment had passed.

'Eighty-nine and still as sprightly as a chicken!' said Sherlock.

Everyone was at peace and absorbing the moment in the comfy heated leather seats. The end of Malvina's reign, unreserved freedom and not to mention Sheridan's big fat cheque (which he obviously wasn't going to brag about), made life good – very good.

No one was in an hurry for the journey to end but shortly it did. Sheridan glided to a halt outside the long-standing home of his father.

The knees of Sherlock Holmes and Mycroft had seen better days. For them, it was a slow and arduous climb up to the famous first-floor apartment. Sheridan and Mark followed sprightly behind them childishly mimicking their geriatric motions. Sheridan had certainly missed his new best friend. He also considered Lestrade a good friend. Hopefully, they would keep in touch.

'Four of your finest cakes please Mrs Hudson,' shouted Sherlock, assuming she had heard them arrive.

The main room of Sherlock's apartment was just as Sheridan imagined it: untidy, cluttered and held a musty presence, however, it was undeniably welcoming. They all piled in. Mycroft aimed for the comfiest wing-back chair. Sherlock examined his mail which had been neatly piled on the desk. Mark and Sheridan headed straight for an A4 sheet of paper taped to the mantlepiece above the smouldering coal fire.

'I think you'd better read this Dad,' said Sheridan, still slightly hesitant at calling him that.

The scribbled note read:

There have to be reprisals

Mrs Hudson's suffering will suffice

G. M.

‘Evil witch!’ raged Sherlock uncharacteristically.

There had been a certain amount of complacency. Sheridan never stopped to think that Malvina may have certain arrangements in place if she ever met her downfall.

Sheridan’s children and estranged wife had remained under police protection during the conviction and trial of the demon, Malvina. No one ever cast a thought about vulnerable and defenceless Mrs Hudson.

Malvina knew this would hurt Sherlock Holmes deeply. His best friend and companion, John Watson was dead because of her actions, frozen to the temperature of liquid nitrogen. Now, Mrs Hudson was missing, taken by the devil’s advocates. Sherlock knew she was too frail to stand even the mildest of physical hardship.

He examined the note with his magnifying glass whilst it remained stuck to the fireplace. Sheridan went on another tact and scanned the room for clues. He examined the pile of today’s mail on the table.

‘Well, she was evidently taken today,’ said Sheridan. ‘What time is the mail normally delivered?’

‘On Tuesdays, between 10:28 and 10:36,’ said Sherlock without hesitation. Only he could give such an accurate answer.

‘Well according to my watch, it’s now, ten to eleven. By my calculation, she was taken no more than 22 minutes ago,’ said Sheridan.

‘According to my studies in the drying and curling qualities of foolscap paper when heated, this note was stuck to the mantlepiece approximately sixteen minutes ago,’ said Sherlock.

Immediately Mycroft reached for his mobile phone.

‘Mycroft here… Yes, I’m out… Never mind about that! There’s been an abduction at approximately 10:30 am from 221b Baker Street. Camera 16A, I believe?’

‘16C,’ corrected Mark.

‘16C… Leave it with you, priority burgundy,’ said Mycroft.

‘Malvina is clearly many things but she’s not stupid. She will have covered herself,’ said Sheridan.

Meanwhile, Sherlock continued to look for clues. He had now decided to pointlessly examine the carpet with his magnifying glass. Clearly, he was deeply concerned but did his best to hide his emotions.

Sherlock Holmes and Mrs Hudson went back a long way; nigh on

forty-five years. Certainly, never a mother, grandma or even a nanny substitute, but her warmth and concern for him over the years was evident. True, her rent charges were always substantial, never any favours in that respect. Sherlock always regarded that as an admirable quality. She was never a pushover to anyone.

Suddenly Mark stopped what he was doing, which wasn't a lot, and sniffed several times.

'Is it my imagination or can anyone smell gas,' said Mark as calmly as possible.

Sherlock, Sheridan and Mycroft sniffed in unison and then raced downstairs as fast as their knees could bear in a bundle of panic.

Mark remained in Sherlock's humble but spacious room for a while.

Despite happy, and often unhappy times over the many years, it was a welcoming room, a calming room, it was a wonderful room. It offered protection, a step back in time – many decades, but always had the modern touches. Now, in the twenty-first century, there was a top of the range Hi-Fi which was mainly used to play classical music, a laptop and printer on a desk, a curved screen television lost in a corner of the room and the famous violin, now modified with an electronic pickup. Right now, it was as far from prison as Mark could possibly imagine. He was still experiencing the euphoria of freedom. Incarceration in an environment full of male headcases was something he would never forget.

He thought about his father, John Watson. He imagined him sitting at the desk, writing up his notes on his typewriter and presently, on the laptop. He remembered the bantering with Sherlock and being the steadying influence in the great sleuth's life. He remembered the failing health of his father in his later life. Being a doctor made matters considerably worse, as he knew more or less what was up with him. A Doctor's optimism never worked on him. He gazed out of the window onto the busy London street and momentarily imagined it cobbled, filled with horses and carriages and men wearing top hats. Then he focused on reality and noticed a stubbed-out cigarette end in an ashtray on the window ledge. The stub had a familiar gold ring around it and was still warm. He raced down the stairs and into the kitchen.

'God, it stinks of gas in here!' said Mark stating the obvious.

'Looks like one of Malvina's menials turned one of the gas hob rings on. Lucky we found it when we did. The whole place could have gone up,' said Sheridan whilst opening the only window.

‘No doubt that was the plan,’ said Sherlock.

Mark had something else to say, ‘Incidentally, there’s a Russian fag end with a gold…’

‘…Ring around it, Yes, I know, I smelt it as we entered the room,’ said Sheridan, condescendingly.

Sherlock examined the coat stand, ‘Her grey hat, scarf and long coat are missing. At least we know what she’s wearing.’

There was nothing more that could be done at Baker Street so they all piled into Sheridan’s new vehicle. Only Mycroft knew where they were going. Only Mycroft knew the significance of ‘*priority Burgundy’*. Sherlock and Mycroft had a brotherly chat in the back seat, regarding their harrowing experiences in prison and then moved on to dear Mrs Hudson and their long-standing memories of her.

‘Think positive both of you! You’re talking as though she’s no longer with us. She’ll be okay, don’t worry,’ assured Sheridan.

Mark also had an unforgettable experience in prison. Being younger than Sherlock and Mycroft, and many of the other falsely accused, it was assumed that he could take a little more maltreatment from the other inmates. He eventually ended up in solitary for his own protection.

‘Are you alright?’ asked Sheridan, glancing caringly at Mark in the front passenger seat.

‘They held me down you know… they…’ tears welled in his eyes.

Sheridan stopped Mark from saying anymore, he detected his tough outer shell fracturing.

‘I know… I know what they did. I can tell by the way you’re walking.’

‘I’ve never particularly wished suffering on anyone before, but I wish the very worst on that bastard Malvina,’ said Mark, choking up.

‘You’re not on your own. Meeting her was perhaps the most surreal experience of my life. Pure evil and absolutely mad,’ said Sheridan profoundly.

Sheridan knew far more about Malvina’s complex and twisted character than he was letting on, but he decided to hold back for now. Mark had to push the negative thoughts out of his mind as best he could and talk about something positive. The new woman in Sheridan’s life was something worth talking about. Unfortunately for Mark, Greta was now an undisclosed subject. Sheridan dearly wanted to tell everyone that he was going to marry her but now was not the

right moment to break the news. Mark eventually resigned himself to talk about Sheridan's new motor and make a few pointless comparisons between it and his Sunbeam Tiger.

Sheridan, not wanting to appear rude, made every effort with the conversation, but he had something on his mind. Something was nagging him deeply. He had seen something, perhaps a clue, perhaps something out of place or an anomaly regarding Mrs Hudson. However, once again, his subconscious was refusing to communicate and tell him what it was.

They pulled up outside a large and sinister-looking building. The black Range Rover matched perfectly. Mycroft said something to a hovering traffic warden which resulted in him promptly walking away. All four hurriedly entered through the revolving glass door and proceeded directly to a busy operations room.

'Found anything Perkins?' asked Mycroft.

'We've narrowed down the video time frame to the time you gave us. As luck would have it, the camera is more or less pointing in the direction of 221B,' said Perkins enthusiastically.

No one said a word as they looked intently at the monitor. The playback was already set up and began by showing the front door of 221B Baker Street opening. Three men emerged, surrounding Mrs Hudson, holding her tightly and then they ushered her into a large black car parked outside. One man squashed her hat down as she entered the back seat. Another man loaded her long draping coat into the car. The car then sped off down the street.

'Hopefully, the recorded video files are synced. We should be able to track them across the city,' said Perkins.

The transition between cameras was perfect. They watched the black car enter the field of view as it travelled down the street.

This was CCTV camera technology working at its best. Every inch of its journey was covered. Every second of the video footage was intensely scrutinised as the car finally pulled up outside a house in the West End.

Immediately Mycroft was on his mobile phone relating the West End address to Scotland Yard.

'As good as this is, I feel we've overlooked something important,' said Sheridan.

They continued to watch the live feed from the final CCTV camera. A few moments later they watched several police cars arriving at the

house.

‘Have faith in the police. It won’t be long now,’ Mycroft assured them.

After a few minutes, the police officers returned to their cars, escorting four handcuffed men. Then Mycroft’s phone rang.

‘Well look again, she has to be there, damn it!’

‘Hang on, hang on! Only three departed from baker street with Mrs Hudson. How come there are now four of them?’ asked Mark.

‘The hat, coat and scarf!’ Sheridan cried out. ‘That’s what didn’t ring true. Heartless kidnappers don’t have compassion. They certainly wouldn’t bother wrapping Mrs Hudson up to keep her warm.’

‘It wasn’t Mrs Hudson, it was someone wearing her hat, scarf and coat,’ Sherlock added.

‘Meaning only one thing, Mrs Hudson still has to be in her house,’ said Sheridan.

‘Yes. Obviously restrained, but goodness knows where.’ said Sherlock.

‘Is there a basement in the house?’ asked Mark.

Moments later they were rapidly heading back down the corridor towards the entrance. The journey back to Baker Street was no relaxed affair. Sod the speeding cameras, keeping out of the bus lanes and running in the engine. Sheridan drove like he was on the Nürburg ring.

Now something else bothered him. His previous brain block was resolved (regarding Mrs Hudson’s hat and coat), but now there was a much more serious matter and he was fully aware of it. The matter of the gas hob left on. It had to be a misdirection and there was only one thing that it could be misdirecting them from.

He knew if he didn’t cross every red light, knock a few cyclists from their saddles and run over a few pedestrian toes, Mrs Hudson may die. He told his passengers his worrying thoughts.

‘If you’re right, and I have a sickening feeling that you are, the slightest spark will be the end of Mrs Hudson… and 221B Baker Street,’ said Sherlock Holmes grimly.

‘I suggest we keep our fingers away from any light switches then,’ said Mark.

Sherlock looked at his pocket watch. It was 11:55 pm and it was a cold day.

‘I believe that the central heating is due to come on shortly for a

midday boost. The time-switch electrical contacts will inevitably spark,' said Sherlock as calmly as he could.

'Exactly when?' asked Sheridan.

'At twelve!' said Sherlock.

Sheridan glanced at the vehicle's digital clock, it was five minutes to twelve. His right foot instantly planted hard on the gas pedal. Yes, he would probably be banned from driving for the rest of his life for doing ninety-five down Oxford Street, mostly on the wrong side of the road, but it was fully justified.

Minutes later, the black Range Rover screeched to a halt outside Sherlock's long-standing, still-standing home. Sheridan and Mark raced ahead, up the few steps and opened the front door. An overpowering smell of gas flowed into their nostrils. The cooker and the gas fire were off. The gas had to be coming from somewhere else. They had a couple of minutes at the most. They couldn't turn off the central heating. In fact, they couldn't turn anything electrical off. That could also cause a spark.

Sherlock and Mycroft eventually followed in. After a thorough search of all the ground floor rooms, there was only one conclusion…

'The entrance to the basement, where is it?' yelled Sheridan.

'If there is one, logically it's either under the stairs or behind the pantry,' said Sherlock.

It wasn't under the stairs and a refrigerator sat in the entrance to the pantry.

'Look, scratches on the floor! The fridge has been moved recently. Quickly, help me pull it out!' shrieked Sheridan.

Barely visible in the dark space behind the fridge, was a square wooden hatch in the floor. Sheridan hastily pulled it upwards with the brass finger hoop. The smell of gas suddenly became overpowering.

'Torch! I need a torch!' yelled Sheridan.

'One here!' said Mycroft.

'Turn it on outside and open all the windows!' said Sheridan decisively.

The beam of the torch revealed stone steps leading down to the dank unused cellar. A hissing noise became louder and louder. He hunted for a light switch but there wasn't one and then he realised that that was a blessing. He cast the beam of his torch about to determine the layout of the cold, damp bricked room. Suddenly a hand illuminated

in the beam, it was old and wrinkly. Mrs Hudson was firmly tied to a pipe. He moved the torch beam away from her eyes and towards the hissing noise. A butane gas canister was responsible, filling the air with highly inflammable gas. He turned the valve off and then untied the rope holding Mrs Hudson to the pipe. Thankfully she was still alive.

She's unconscious but still has a strong pulse!' he cheered.

Sheridan had no choice but to carry her aloft, which wasn't easy. As informed earlier, Mrs Hudson was partial to homemade cakes and the occasional steak and kidney pie. As well as heavy, she was icy cold. Her limp chubby torso dangled insecurely over Sheridan's shoulder. Slowly, he climbed the slippery stone stairway into daylight and fresher air. Then he carried her through the kitchen and out onto the relative safety of busy Baker Street. The others followed. Mark now took over. He was best qualified to revive Mrs Hudson. He wasn't a doctor but his father was and a lot of useful knowledge had inevitably rubbed off on him.

Ten minutes passed before Mrs Hudson stirred. By this time, the paramedics and the police had arrived. Neither had a lot to do. Mrs Hudson had recovered sufficiently to rant on about cakes and scones. The police unnecessarily checked the entire house and then, for some reason, posted a young constable outside the front door. The paramedics whisked Mrs Hudson to hospital for a thorough check-over. Her oxygen count was low and they assumed that she was suffering from shock but of course, she wasn't. She was a tough old bird.

Thankfully the worrying ordeal was over. The four men at the West End address were charged with attempted murder, assault and above all, mistreating a lovely old lady. Malvina's last stand had failed.

Chapter 37
Cards on the table

Mycroft had to slot back into reality, after all, he was a civil servant and a very important one at that. He insisted on finding his own way back to his office. Once inside a black cab, he insisted that the driver stuck to the speed limit, drove on the correct side of the road and kept away from people's toes.

Sheridan, Mark and Sherlock were prevented from going back inside 221B until the gas had completely dispersed. Consequently, they made a snap decision and walked to The Globe pub, a severe thirst had developed by all.

It was the first time that Mark and Sherlock Holmes could properly relax and revel in their new understated freedom. Sheridan also had many things to be grateful for. Foremost, not being a wanted man and therefore not having to live inconspicuously. Of course, they weren't the only ones to revel in freedom, no doubt, the many others falsely imprisoned were also celebrating.

Now thankfully, the country was quickly getting back to normal with the right people, rightfully in charge. Over the past few months, many questionable laws had been passed, many perfectly good people had been sacked, many guilty people found innocent and many innocent people found guilty. England had become a truly troubled and undesirable place to live. Thanks to Sheridan, no longer was anyone beholding to evil Griselda Malvina. However, unfortunately, the wheels of justice, wax slow. Nothing could be done to speed up the present day, painfully slow, bureaucratic system. The travesties of justice that had recently taken place had to be rectified properly and lawfully. Courts instantly became overloaded with appeals, reviews and reopened cases. Thankfully, many of the wrongly imprisoned were allowed out on bail but were annoyingly tagged until their cases came up – again. Mycroft, Sherlock and Mark were told that they also would have to be tagged until their cases were officially reviewed. They all pretty much responded in the same way with a very useful couple of words…

It seemed to work in their favour.

There was no doubt, however, that eventually, England would become a wonderful country to live in again.

Mark bought the first round. They sat at a round table against a bay window, looking out onto a busy London street. A while passed in silence while they enjoyed the first slow sips of their drinks. Spontaneously, Sherlock raised his glass, 'To John, Doctor John Watson, your father, the best friend I ever had. I'll deeply miss him.'

'Yes, to Dad! At least we know there's more life in the old dog yet,' said Mark, reflecting on the bright side.

Sherlock looked puzzled at Mark's choice of words.

'Er, yes, undoubtedly. Your benevolent attitude is admirable. I think we should also raise our glasses to the real hero of the day without whom England would undoubtedly still be on its knees and I for one would now be 196 degrees below zero,' said Sherlock.

'Thanks, but it wasn't all down to me,' said Sheridan smugly.

'Not you! I'm referring to the unsung hero of the day, Claude,' said Sherlock abruptly.

'Claude? What, Malvina's Claude, that half-dressed servant?' gasped Sheridan almost choking on his beer. 'What's he got to do with anything?'

'Everything Son, everything!' said Sherlock. 'Who do you think set me on the trail in the first place? Told me about Everest? Came up with the idea of the chess pieces? Brought you and Mark together?'

'I think you better explain,' said Sheridan sternly.

Sherlock took a large swig of beer and began his tale.

'As I told you, I have always kept close ties with you even though you were completely unaware of this.'

'So you say,' said Sheridan.

'Many years ago, I befriended a nurse called Rose. I first met her in the corridor outside the maternity room just after Irene, your mother, died and you were born. We became close friends. She supplied me with all the relevant adoption information: Your new parents, names, address and much more. Anyway, a year later, Rose happened to give birth to a son, his name was Claude.'

'Whoa, whoa, hang on, what are you saying, apron boy is my brother?' suggested Sheridan.

'Don't be ridiculous!' said Sherlock, continuing with his account. 'Now, several years later, as a young man, Claude took on the unenviable task of becoming Malvina's butler. At the time, she was

kind, with a heart but very soon he discovered that Malvina had a serious mental problem. I believe you momentarily experienced it while you were in her apartment,'

'While I was in her cleavage, to be precise. Very unnerving, a right Jekyll and Hyde personality,' said Sheridan.

'Dissociative identity disorder, to be precise,' said Sherlock.

'You're saying Malvina had a good side?' snapped Mark.

'Yes, but as time went by the evil side of her got stronger and more dominant. Brief moments of her good persona would mostly be consumed in pleading with Claude to find a way to combat her evil deeds. What could he do? Fortunately, he remembered that I was an acquaintance of his mother. He heavily disguised himself and paid me a visit.'

'You took on the case?'

'What choice had I? I knew it would probably be the most perilous case I had ever taken on, but this was my chance to try and put the country back in order. Besides I owed a lot to his mother.'

'It was Claude, then, who told you about Everest? You calculated that he was your best shot at exposing Malvina, but you got caught?' suggested Sheridan.

'Unfortunately, yes. John and I walked straight into her trap. Powerful stuff, Benzodiazepine. Once we were sedated there was nothing we could do. Took all my willpower to leave a few clues here and there. Now that we were powerless to do anything, it was down to Claude.'

'This is where Mark and I came in I presume?' said Sheridan.

'Yes, with the help of his mother and the internet, Claude managed to find where you lived. It wasn't particularly difficult as she knew your adopted name. Mark wasn't difficult to find either. It was then that Claude came up with the ingenious chess pieces idea to bring you together.'

'You're going to tell me now, that they weren't from the future!' said Mark.

'Amazing what you can achieve with car body filler and a spoonful of metallic sparkle dust. Presumably, the cryptic code was simply written on a slither of paper inside the moulding. Thanks to his evil employer, Malvina, Claude had access to the most proficient burglars in the country. Using their services, it was a simple matter of picking your front door locks, planting the chess pieces in a prominent position and leaving without a trace of a break-in,' explained Sherlock.

‘Yes, yes, but this cryptic code. The coordinates of Bellington Hall can be explained, but the exact time and date when you and Doctor Watson were to be prepared for cryopreservation?’ puzzled Sheridan.

‘It sounds like some clever magic trickery…’ said Sherlock.

‘Or sent from the future!’ insisted Mark.

‘Yes, but I can assure you there’s no magic or time machine involved. I can only assume that everyone must be booked in for the process days perhaps weeks in advance, that must have included myself and John. Claude must have bravely accessed the itinerary on Malvina’s computer.’

‘That does seem to fit. The caretaker did say he had a slot for us two, inferring some kind of schedule,’ said Sheridan.

‘There you are then, all explained. More often than not, there’s always a simple explanation, no matter how complex the circumstances happen to be. Remember that Son,’ said Sherlock.

‘Hang on, Mycroft had the chess pieces carbon-dated; they came from the future. However improbable, it had to be the truth. That’s what you said,’ protested Mark.

‘Sounds familiar,’ said Sherlock.

‘I know that’s what I said at the time, but I was never convinced,’ said Sheridan.

‘There’s no other explanation!’ snapped Mark, remaining in denial.

‘Well actually, there is,’ Sherlock had another gulp of his lager before continuing. ‘It’s complicated but logical. You were curious as to why the cryonics facility appeared to be above board and not just an elaborate sham to extract money out of the crooked rich. Undoubtedly this was Malvina’s intention, to put up a convincing façade, make a fortune and then abandon the facility, a few months down the line. Remember though, the good persona of Malvina specifically asked Claude to combat her evil deeds. The only way Claude could think of carrying out her wishes was to convince her evil side that her cryonic suspended animation service was a long-term success.’

‘By receiving two chess pieces allegedly from 720 years in the future!’ Sheridan exclaimed.

‘Specifically, from me or John, brought back from the dead, well into the future. The two *time-travelling* chess pieces were intentionally made known to Malvina with the cryptic message inside. Her informers saw to that. Now she had to change her strategy. Thinking her cryonics service was successful, she couldn’t possibly shut it down.

It had to stay operational well beyond her lifetime. Instantly, Malvina realised that there was a huge advantage in knowing facts from the distant future. Her clients would be guaranteed continually care and in return, useful future information would be sent back through time,' said Sherlock.

'Yes, she threatened them with a paradox,' said Sheridan.

'Claude now took a great risk in contacting my brother, Mycroft. He told him his clever plan. Mycroft knew exactly what he had to do to maintain the deception. He was banking on all text messages to the island being intercepted so he replied to Sheridan's text with a completely fictitious carbon dating result.'

'Yes, 720 years, inexcusable of me. Such a precise result, but I didn't realise the significance for quite a while,' said Sheridan.

'Significance? Come on, spill the beans!' snapped Mark.

'720, the number of the CCTV camera that had a rotator problem, remember?'

'Of course! Basically, then, what you're saying is, the chess pieces are not from the future?' doubted Mark.

'I'm afraid not my friend. Anyway, the important thing was that it was the much-needed convincer. The conclusive proof that the cryonic facility had an outcome. The caretaker said, just over 700 years, proving that he had intercepted Mycroft's text message!' said Sheridan.

'So, to recap, this Claude chap made the chess pieces to fool Malvina. Fool her into thinking they were from the future so that she wouldn't turn off the cryonics facility,' said Mark.

'You've got it!' said Sheridan.

'And he inserted cryptic clues inside them hoping you and I would get together and put the world to rights?' added Mark.

'That's about the long and short of it,' said Sherlock.

'Yes, but what about the missing dignitaries? How do they fit in?' asked Mark thinking he had found a flaw in Sherlock's explanation.

'Well, that's fairly obvious. They all had a very chequered past…apart from me and your father, of course. Being so prominent, they knew it would only be a matter of time before they were found out, disgraced and locked up,' said Sherlock.

'Far better to take their chances and hopefully, wake up several centuries in the future where their crimes would be long forgotten,'

added Sheridan.

It was a lot to take in, especially for Mark. They all had several gulps of warm beer before Mark had something very pertinent to say.

'My father is dead then?

'I'm sorry, but the signs were clear, yellowing of the eyes, he clearly had pain in his right shoulder and he looked as though he'd lost weight,' said Sheridan.

'He had years left,' said Mark angrily.

'Unfortunately, he hadn't,' said Sherlock, 'he'd been diagnosed with primary liver cancer. He only had a few weeks to live.'

'For God's sake, why didn't he tell me?' protested Mark.

'You know your father, never wanted to make a fuss,' said Sherlock.

'There is something to consider. Authorities have now pledged to keep the cryonic process at Longyearbyen, operational, using some of Malvina's amassed fortune.'

'What? Even though most of the clientele are reprobates?' interrupted Mark.

'It would still be classed as murder, to terminate the process. Who knows, eventually, it could fulfil its purpose. Maybe your father *will* be brought back to life in the future when they can cure things such as terminal liver cancer,' said Sheridan encouragingly.

'Yes, most likely. However, time travel may still remain firmly in the realms of the imagination,' said Sherlock, profoundly.

This was exactly what Mark wanted to hear. He settled back in his seat with his pint, imagining his dad living in a time of space travel, in a world free from wars, crime and people like Griselda Malvina.

However, imagination is never fact.

'Oh, by the way, I have something for you,' said Sheridan.

He reached into his pocket and produced an expensive Omega watch – Mark's watch to be precise. A while back, he had pawned it to pay the hotel bills in Longyearbyen. It was now all clean and polished. Mark was overcome with emotion. He found it hard to speak, but what he did say was very poignant.

'Thank you, you are a dear true friend.'

Sherlock and Sheridan relaxed in their chairs and had a quiet thoughtful moment. It had been one hell of a month for all of them.

An adventure none wanted to relive again. They now fully appreciated the welcoming atmosphere of the English Pub and wallowed in the calmness of the moment.

‘There’s just one thing I can’t get my head around, how the hell have you coped with all this stress and danger over all these years?’ Sheridan asked his father.

‘I could say, welcome to my life but to be fair it’s not always been like this. Rarely has it been particularly perilous or for that matter, overly stressful. Unfortunately, Son, you’ve had quite a bad introduction to the world of being a consulting detective,’ said Sherlock.

‘I wouldn’t say it’s been all bad, far from it, I’ve met Greta,’ said Sheridan cheerfully.

‘Anyway, I think this is an excellent time to mention my retirement. I trust you two are going to carry on the tradition?’

‘Don’t see why not, if it’s alright with my new friend. First, though, I’m going to take a short trip to Norway,’ said Sheridan.

‘He doesn’t get it, does he?’ said Mark after having another gulp of his warm beer.

‘Sheridan, my dear son, what you have to understand is that Watson and I… together we were greater than the sum of our parts as they say. We were an item, in a purely professional way.’ said Sherlock with a smirk.

‘I get the picture. What are you like with children?’

Chapter 38
Loose ends

Sheridan never, for one minute, throughout his recent escapades, forgot about his wonderful children. However, he was now a different person – far more assertive and brimming with confidence. Now he was someone who could easily brush off a little angst and awkwardness from whoever decided to throw it at him. His new image: the dark sunglasses, smart attire and the sleek new car was never intended to be ostentatious. It was the new and complete Sheridan.

He pulled up outside the house that used to be his. Officially it still was, but he no longer considered it as home. Drawing up on the drive, as he used to do, he now regarded as taking liberties, so he parked on the road. Besides, it was doubtful if the oversized vehicle would fit on the narrow flagged drive. He expected the children to run out and greet him, but they didn't. Even when he rang the doorbell, nothing stirred for several minutes and then someone he'd never seen before, answered the door.

'Yes… before you start, mate, we rent this place, so, as much as we'd like your new, less draughty windows in this dump, we can't,' said a severely obese woman dressed in a dirty grey tracksuit, eating a slice of pizza.

Two things slightly irritated Sheridan: firstly, a complete stranger was in his house and secondly, the stranger called it a dump. Casting these minor things aside, where the hell was his family? He thought quickly on his feet.

'No, don't worry madam, I'm not a salesman, I'm from the fair rents association. It's on record that you're paying far too much rent.'

'You know, mate, *I* thought that. Six hundred pounds a bleedin' month!' snapped the lady slob.

'Six hundred pounds? Hmm, on first impressions, that seems far too much – well over the going rate for this type of property. We've got the landlady as a Mrs Carol Banner.'

'Yeah, that's right mate.'

'From what you've told me, I think she's due a visit. I'll call on her on

the way back and insist she reduces the rent amount and you get reimbursed.'

Sheridan feigned a hasty search of his pockets.

'Damn, I've left her address in the office. Oh well, I'll call on her next week.'

'Hang on mate, I've got her address. Come in, come in,' she beckoned.

Sheridan did as he was told for curiosities sake more than anything. The lady slob was absolutely right, it was a dump; a filthy, smelly, festering hovel of a dump. The tenant had certainly left her mark on the once pristine home. The nearly new wool carpet *he* paid for, was covered in food remains and spillages, trodden into the deep pile. The doors were covered with greasy finger marks and scratches. The whole place stank of urine and the three culprits – cats, were asleep on his, now filthy, cream sofa. At this point, Sheridan stopped being judgemental and accepted that some people don't necessarily have the high standards of cleanliness and hygiene that other normal, decent people tend to have.

''Ere you are mate,' she passed him a scruffy piece of paper with some writing on it.

'Thank you, Madam. You should receive your rebate in the next few days along with compensation for your inconvenience,' Sheridan lied.

He could easily have fumed about all this, but he rose above it and calmly set off towards the supplied address. A few minutes later, he travelled the short distance and pulled up outside a large detached new-build on an exclusive estate. An expensive car was parked on the wide drive, in front of a double, perhaps treble garage.

'Hmm, this so-called Robert is obviously doing alright for himself,' said Sheridan out loud, to himself.

He wasn't there long before Polly and Daniel burst through the elegant oak-coloured UPVC front door and ran down the drive with happy faces and open arms. He hugged both of them together. Predictably there was no sign of Carol. His mind momentarily wandered. He wondered if the divorce had come through yet.

'Daddy, Daddy, have you come to take us back home?' said Poppy almost pleading.

Sheridan couldn't answer, he just kissed her on the forehead.

'I hate it here Dad. I'm bored!' said Daniel.

'Is this where Mum's new friend lives?' asked Sheridan tentatively.

‘Yes, Uncle Bob, he puts gooey stuff in his hair,’ said Polly.

‘He doesn’t know anything about computer games either. All he talks about is golf and he won’t give me the password to the wi-fi,’ said Daniel.

‘Look on the bright side, at least you’ll have more time to catch up on your homework!’

Sheridan instantly realised that this was the wrong thing to say. Daniel was clearly upset about the recent changes in his life. Sheridan recognised the signs.

‘Don’t worry son, I’ll sort things out.’

‘Mummy acts all silly when she’s with Uncle Bob,’ said Polly.

‘She must be happy then?’ suggested Sheridan.

‘I’m not, I hate him,’ protested Daniel.

‘I don’t hate him but he’s not my Daddy. Can *you* come and live with us?’ asked Polly.

‘That could be a little bit awkward. I tell you what, would you like to come on holiday to Norway with me instead?’

It went without saying that Polly and Daniel were overjoyed.

At first, Daniel was slightly disappointed that it was somewhere cold rather than baking hot. However, snowball fights and sledging seemed to sway him even though it was doubtful if there was much snow in Norway in September.

Before he departed, Sheridan needed to sort out one or two loose ends. This involved having a few overdue words with his estranged wife, or ex-wife, if the divorce had come through.

No longer was Carol going to walk all over him. Enough was enough. She had taken far too many liberties recently – having an affair with this Robert, chap, renting out his house without his permission and relocating his children without telling him. However, far worse than all that, her unforgivable betrayal he could never forget. If there was one person that knew he was innocent, knew that the abuse charges Malvina had instigated against him were false, it was the woman he had been married to for twelve years. All he wanted was to see his children that day at Dimchurch woods. However, through Carol’s actions, his children had to go through the ordeal of seeing their father being hunted down by the police like a plagued rat. That was unforgivable.

‘Now go and pack. You’ll need lots of warm clothes. I’ll pick you up

tomorrow… Daniel, would you do something for me? Will you go and tell your mum I want to see her and tell her to bring your passports.'

Eventually, after several minutes, Carol came out and hesitantly walked down to the car. It had to remain amicable – no heated words. Carol was part of his past life and now he had moved on, significantly.

'What do you want? What do you want the passports for?' she said coldly.

'I'm taking the children on holiday for a while,' said Sheridan calmly.

'The hell you are!' fumed Carol.

'Please, make sure they have warm clothes packed.'

'I've already made arrangements for them,' said Carol curtly.

'That's unfortunate… I'll be calling for them at nine tomorrow morning.'

Sheridan's aloof and unyielding tone was clearly irritating Carol. The old Sheridan would have quickly squirmed into submission by now, but through his experiences, over the last few weeks, he had transmogrified into a more assertive, stronger person.

'Who the hell do you think you are in your posh suit and swanky car? James Bond? You're a poxy computer programmer for God's sake!' raged Carol, hysterically.

'Calm yourself, the children will hear you…'

Sheridan couldn't leave it there, he had to know. His aloofness sagged slightly, 'What went wrong, we used to be good together? I naively thought we were happy, good kids, a normal family… why?'

'You became boring,' said Carol poignantly, after a little thought.

Sheridan also thought for a moment. He couldn't argue with that. She was absolutely right, he *used to be* boring.

'I hope you and Robert are happy together. You're a good mother and I know you'll always put the children first. That's all I could possibly wish for.'

Carol briefly lowered her gaze to the floor – possibly with shame or possibly regret. At least she had the decency to hand over the children's passports to him.

With that, he climbed back into the car and replaced his sunglasses.

'Nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Make sure they're ready!' he shouted and then calmly drove off.

In the next town, he called in at a bank. Amazingly there was still £49, 651 in the joint account. He opened two new accounts in the names of Polly Banner and Daniel Banner. The nice young lady bank clerk allowed him to do this because, conveniently, he happened to have their passports. Then he transferred £24,825 into each one and then he removed his name from the almost empty joint account.

Chapter 39
Green fairy dress

As it turned out, Mark finally found his true vocation in life – a childminder. Polly and Daniel took an instant liking to their new Uncle Mark – considerably more than they had done with their new uncle Bob. This was chiefly because he had time for them. As much as Sheridan loved his children, he had to admit it was always in a minute or when I've done this or later or when I get back or can't you amuse yourself or I'm busy or I'm tired. Mark said none of that; his dedication was unrelenting. Soon they would have a new Step Mum Greta to go with their new uncle Mark. Sheridan hoped that she would be accepted in the same way.

Daniel and Polly had never been on a ferry, let alone on one you sleep on. It was something they would remember for the rest of their lives. It was also a journey that Sheridan would never forget. He was with his children; his new friend and companion and he was on the way to see someone he loved dearly and was going to marry. A hunger for her company wrenched deep within. It had never been like this before. He was happy, he was sad, he was apprehensive, but that's what love is all about.

Of course, there were still things he unavoidably noticed onboard. His unique talents never switched off: A drug smuggler, an escaped convict, a heavily disguised famous person, countless couples having extramarital affairs, and an international jewel thief, all wandering innocently about the decks, but he turned a blind eye to it all. Even super-sleuths have to have a day off occasionally.

The next day, the large ferry slowly approached the rugged and complex coast of West Norway. Slowly it glided silently past numerous Norwegian hillsides littered with pretty white cottages. Eventually, the port of Stavanger came into view and Sheridan's heart began to race. Greta was either going to be there or not. If she was there waiting for him, he would surely marry her and spend the rest of his life with her. If she wasn't there… it didn't bear thinking about.

Over the past week, he had tried to call her several times but failed to get through. If he did connect, the number just coldly rang out. He had her address, but a letter wouldn't get there in time. There was only one way.

Detective inspector Traske owed Sheridan a big fat favour, whether he realised it or not. Sheridan still happened to have his mobile number on his phone, so in desperation, he gave him a call. Police can do extraordinary things across great distances if they are gently persuaded to – like sending a Police officer around to Greta's address and passing on a non-crime related message. Naturally, this is not the true function of any Police force, including Norway's, but thanks to Sheridan and Greta, a vile and vicious murderer was brought swiftly to justice. They couldn't refuse.

So, if she wasn't there, she didn't want to be there, as simple as that. She had clearly enjoyed the romance and the unforgettable excitement even though it did include several near-death experiences. Perhaps, though, she had decided to move on with her life… without Sheridan.

Sheridan had learnt to expect the worst. He could cope – again. That was life, that was his life, that had always been his life.

The ferry manoeuvred its colossal mass into the quayside. The steel side of the hull hit the huge wooden buffers with a dull thud. Minutes later, a walkway was erected to disembark. No one was there. The quayside was deserted. Greta was nowhere to be seen. No worries, Sheridan suspected that if she *was* there to greet him, it wouldn't be at the quayside, it would be in the warmth of the arrival hall.

Mark, Daniel and Polly placed their feet on solid ground with excitement, Sheridan with trepidation. It was quite a long walk to the passport control. Mark fooled around playfully with Daniel. Polly held her father's hand, she sensed his anxiety and despite her age, she knew the reason. She wanted her Daddy to be happy just like her Mummy was. It was only right.

Passport control took an age and then suddenly they were through. Then they walked along a short corridor and into the large hall. Sheridan looked frantically about, so many people waving, weaving about, men with placards, tour groups, holiday representatives.

And then a gap in the crowds cleared.

Greta stood alone, radiating in her own pool of sunlight. No longer was she dressed in functional thermal clothing and heavy boots but in a pretty short dress and stilettos. Her blonde hair now not tied up, but softly draped over her slender shoulders.

Her beaming smile lit up her face and lit up Sheridan's soul. His heart raced, his love for her was beyond words. He wanted desperately to hold her, squeeze her and do other things with her, but that wouldn't be appropriate, especially in front of the children. For now, a tight hug and a quick kiss had to suffice. Greta forcibly detached her

attention away from Sheridan and nodded politely at Mark, then she stooped down.

‘So, you must be the very beautiful Polly, and you must be the very intelligent Daniel,’ she said with complete conviction.

After a few shy moments, Polly had something pertinent to say. ‘Are you going to marry my Daddy?’

Greta smiled and momentarily thought about Polly’s question.

‘Yes, I am, if that’s alright with you?

Polly also thought for a moment.

‘Okay, you can marry Daddy, but only if I can wear a green fairy dress at the wedding.’

‘I’m not wearing a tie,’ said Daniel.

‘Well, that seems to be sorted out then. I thought San Francisco would be a good place,’ said Sheridan.

‘San Francisco, that’ll be different,’ said Greta.

Daniel was clearly rekindling the spirit in his new uncle, he had stifled it for long enough. Polly held Greta’s hand tightly. Sheridan had the luggage trolley to contend with. For the moment, where they were heading, only Greta knew. For the future, their path in life would be anyone’s guess. A new super sleuth, a new associate and a kung fu, one-woman-army would surely be a formidable force for any adversary they were destined to encounter.

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Other books by the Author:

The Residents of Wardate

Poppy Cock is a charismatic News correspondent who suffers horrific burns from a callous incident whilst on an assignment.

Although the autonomous android Madeline Bull is truly

groundbreaking, there are insurmountable problems.

The solution; four brilliant scientists decide to interface Poppy Cock's disfigured body using her nerve connections and a revolutionary wireless system to their Madeline Bull android. The price for this convenient arrangement: Poppy must appear to die then become Mad' Bull and fulfil her intended purpose, to exterminate members of Wardate – a gathering of the world's most evil people.

After completing three missions, her instructions abruptly stop and Poppy's food supply inconveniently dries up. It is an understatement to say that there is much more afoot than she realises.

Return to Wardate

Madeline Bull returns as the feisty android. This time Madeline faces her biggest challenges yet. The world is purposely charged with hatred and a new world war is on the horizon. Enter Madeline to thwart the dissenters and calm the world but there are far, far deeper concerns. For other reasons, the world is on the brink of obliteration, genocide is looming. Unknowingly Madeline has been modified and holds the key to save the world – if she really wants to.

Ward off strangers

The saga of The Residents of Wardate concludes with Madeline Bull, the feisty android, returning to a world where people are disappearing in their thousands. This time she has finally met her match and there is no way out. All she can do is put others first and try to put the world back in order.
The reward for her ultimate sacrifice is Hope.

Again

Two perfect people, Caban and Keeva, saved from a doomed world, have a very important job to do. 300 million years later absolutely everything rests squarely on their shoulders. It may well involve unimaginable sacrifices and dangers beyond imagination but to refuse the request of an alien, who looks like Caban's father, is simply bad manners. Caban and Keeva incidentally are Adam and Eve.

They say there's an explanation for most things in life… so just for a while, forget everything you know about everything and open your mind. All you really need to know right now is that a cheeseburger is the most underrated thing in the universe.

Kingdom of Queens

Grandpa has a pressing story to tell his twin granddaughters, but it is real or imaginary? He tells of an ancient Kingdom deep within the Patagonian ice fields, which is completely inaccessible and hidden from the rest of the world. This is as intended as it happens to be the home of all the surviving dragons. The fabled creatures now have only two purposes; to protect the people of the kingdom and keep the climate temperate with their fiery breath. Unfortunately, the survival of the Kingdom and the dragons are now seriously threatened. Grandpa is the only one who can restore the Kingdom to its former glory.

A dragon named Delightful (Kingdom of Queens)

The Queens, Tegan and Caron, have now settled in as rulers of the magical dragon Kingdom. Everything is perfect for a while, but one day, while the Queens are out for a morning run, an old evilness is disturbed. As a consequence, Queen Tegan becomes spiteful and tiresome with the Kingdom. She instructs Dragon Brathen, against her wishes, to take her home, back to the Netherworld. It is imperative that the rogue Queen and Brathen return, or the Kingdom will perish. There has to be a rescue mission…

The Author…

If you haven't *yet* read the Bios in the Author's other books, it doesn't really matter. All you need to know is that, apparently, he has been educated to the highest standards by the very best of British institutions and he is extremely well read in several fields. He is also a compulsive liar.

Continuing on with his pet hates, another one to add to the list is big words. 'Why use one word when you can use ten words instead and pad out the book at the same time?' he argues. He has come to the conclusion that politicians use big words to bamboozle the common people and media presenters use big words to show off. Of course, the author doesn't use big words because he doesn't know any.